

*This resource, from our Sustainable Volunteering Officer, Eleanor Moore, details new ways to encourage volunteers during the pandemic.*

**Distance, virtual and micro-volunteering** can be done at a distance without a need to be physically in the museum. So these kinds of volunteering are ideally suited to the current circumstances in which we must all work from home where we can.

These opportunities provide ultimate flexibility and can therefore open up volunteering to a much wider range of people. Individuals who might have encountered access issues with regular volunteering roles on site can now take part from home.

So, as well as helping your museum to achieve important tasks and projects, these kinds of volunteering roles can increase the diversity of your volunteer team.

### In this resource we:

- share insights from Sophie Cummings, Curator at the REME Museum and previously with Swindon Borough Council, on keeping distance volunteering on track
- suggest a ideas for helping at a distance – including a simple, micro-volunteering challenge for your stewards while your museum is closed
- share Clifton Suspension Bridge's experience of involving two volunteers at a distance to help with research their Hawkshaw and Barlow Untold project in 2018
- offer some general tips for how to plan and manage volunteering that is happening at a distance

### Keeping distance volunteering on track

Sophie Cummings, Curator at the REME Museum and previously with Swindon Borough Council, shares her tips:

"When I was at Lydiard House in Swindon, we ran a short distance volunteering project to transcribe a 17<sup>th</sup> century recipe book, with grant funding from The Wellcome Trust. We sent page scans to volunteers to read and transcribe, to create a digital resource for researchers. It worked well, but there was a lot of learning, too. If I did it again there would have been agreed conventions in place at the beginning to ensure accuracy and consistency.

**The same principles about volunteer management that you'd apply with any volunteering project - support, contact, feedback, understanding motivations - were key, even if 90% of contact was via email or phone.**

Now I'm at REME, we are identifying some specific and targeted distance volunteering opportunities we can offer while we are closed, especially around helping with catalogue descriptions for our vehicles and weapons collections. We have some contacts for people who would like to help, and we would send them a batch of, say, 5, catalogue entries at a time and ask them to research and draft fuller and more detailed entries."

### Top tips:

- Apply the same principles of managing volunteers to those involved in distance, virtual or micro-volunteering projects.
- Download our [Volunteer Management 'Where are you now?' Checklist](#) to help you.

### Short and sweet?

Micro and virtual volunteering do not necessarily require a long term, fixed-time or regular commitment. Volunteers are asked to sign up to a clearly defined, discrete task, often in large numbers. This suits people for whom making a regular and long term commitment to an organisation is impractical or impossible, but who still want to help.

Sending out micro volunteering challenges can be a good way to build new supporters at a time when your museum needs them – why not appeal to readers of your Facebook page to like and share your Facebook posts about a current fundraising appeal? Or browse images from your collection online and choose a favourite? Ask your long term volunteers to do this as well.

Falmouth Art Gallery has recently posted a brand new challenge:

<https://lovefalmouthvolunteers.volunteermakers.org/get-involved/hour-or-two/create-your-own-masterpiece-recreate-one-of-the-works-from-falmouth-art-gallery-collection/69/>

### Task volunteers with sharing their unique perspective on the Museum

The chances are your Front of House volunteers, or stewards, aren't feeling very involved whilst the Museum is shut. They may be feeling that their role is going to change, if and when it becomes possible to volunteer in person again. Some may be considering stepping back from museum volunteering due to underlying worry in these uncertain times. You are unlikely to have all the answers to these concerns.

Volunteers are often referred to as the people who 'make' the museum, and whose intervention makes the experience of visiting unique. They know every creak of the stairs, the quirks of the displays, the temperamental moods of the interactives, the gruesome extra facts to share with families...

Even while the future of the visitor experience is still extremely uncertain, why not ask volunteers to share their personal reflections on the museum displays?

#### Why do this?

- To help volunteers to feel connected and involved by making a practical contribution from home that shares their stories of what's on display at the museum.
- To bring the museum closer to its supporters during closure.
- While you're closed, to share volunteers' favourite parts of the displays on social media or on your website as part of a virtual tour, or museum highlights feature. This could be spread over several weeks while the Museum continues to be closed.
- When you are open again, these vox pop recordings could become part of a self-guided tour that visitors could download onto their phones
- If not every volunteer chooses to return to stewarding, you will be capturing their experience, insights and love of the museum in a modest way and be able to hand their knowledge on to future stewards
- To show how much you value their current role with the museum, however this may change in future



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## Try getting volunteers to use the recording facility on their phones, and to:

- Record a short sound bite or a vox pop film of themselves
- Explain a favourite part of the displays from their own point of view – a personal reminiscence can bring any subject to life. See what they can share in 30 seconds, 1 and 3 minutes
- Attach their recording to an email, telling you what it refers to, and send it in to you

### Don't forget to:

Offer support to volunteers with the technicalities, by phone or video call; emphasize the need to record in a quiet space.

- discuss with volunteers how you plan to use the recording, and get their permission to do so. Even if they signed a general deed of assignment of copyright for their original work, it's good practice to ask them to waive copyright in any recordings, because they automatically hold copyright in their own words and image.
- provide some suggestions for subjects to cover, but don't be too prescriptive – share the creative aspects of the task!
- come up with some storytelling prompts to help volunteers to get started and to help to structure their reminiscence
- say thank you!
- when you use their recording, tell them and say thank you again!

## Top tips:

- Remember to thank your volunteers for their time and effort
- You could mention them in a newsletter or celebrate milestones on social media to acknowledge volunteers' contribution

## Case Study:

***We spoke to Kat Tudor, until recently Community Learning and Volunteer Officer at Clifton Suspension Bridge in Bristol, about their involvement of volunteers at a distance to carry out research for a new project. She explains how the ‘virtual’ volunteers have become part of the team:***

### **What are distance or virtual volunteers doing to support the museum?**

Currently we have 2 distance volunteers, one is based locally and was recruited through a Facebook appeal, and one was an onsite volunteer who moved away and wanted to continue volunteering. They have both been helping the Visitor Centre with a new project called Hawkshaw and Barlow Untold, by researching through virtual and real archives for primary source information which will be used in a new exhibition in 2018.

### **How did you plan for their involvement and then recruit them?**

We heard of the term “Micro Volunteering”, and we were also looking for new researchers. We thought that this task could be something that volunteers could do from home in a time that suits them. We put an advert out on Facebook and I had some instant emails of interest. We had not done this before, so we just wanted to see if there would be interest and then speak to people on an individual basis- firstly through email.

### **Tell us a bit about how you got to know them, established the tasks involved in the work, and ‘inducted’ them into the organisation at a distance?**

Firstly I wrote a Volunteer Researcher Project Plan, this included; information about Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust, a summary of Hawkshaw and Barlow Untold, the aims and objectives of the project and what archives needed to be researched and what information we were looking for. This was a chance for the micro volunteer to select a task that they felt was of interest to them. I got to know the new recruit through phone and email, and we did have a brief face to face meeting as well. They were asked to read and agree to the volunteer agreement, and their induction covered intellectual property issues too. As they were local I also made sure to invite them to any social and volunteer meetings, and to include them in any newsletter updates. This meant that they were part of the general volunteer team.

### **How has distance volunteering worked for the volunteers?**

The volunteers usually started by consulting other Archives’ online databases to identify relevant material; they then moved on to producing short research summaries in a chosen area. We provided guidance on referencing.

I have found that the ideal person to volunteer remotely has to be self-motivated, and the institution has to set deadlines for work to be expected. I also think the institution needs to be understanding of their other commitments – the reason they cannot do something in person is often because they are busy!

### **The volunteers’ perspectives?**

Comment from distance volunteer: “I have two preschool children and it’s much easier for me to manage my own time, and work when I can, than commit to a certain number of hours or certain times. I’ve really enjoyed the experience and found it rewarding. I’ve enjoyed learning about the history of the bridge, finding some interesting articles for the display, using my brain for a change and meeting a good group of people – I went to one meeting and a social event, so although I was volunteering from a distance I felt part of something. I hope my relationship with the Bridge team continues ”

### **How has distance volunteering benefited the museum?**

It has benefited us hugely, because we rely on a team of volunteers to conduct the research for our project. We were lucky that both distance volunteers have been reliable and easy to contact. They have kept us in the loop when they have other commitments and been honest when they feel a task has reached its limit. Technology has also been helpful, as a lot of archives they consulted have digitised collections, and we used file sharing sites such as Dropbox to be able to save research.



## General tips for how to plan and manage volunteering that is happening at a distance

### Whatever you do, try to keep in touch!

Even if it feels like there is not a lot of news to share, provide a short update to volunteers regularly. Better not to leave volunteers imagining the worst, or feeling taken for granted.

### Any volunteering task will go better if you...

Think about what **motivates** the particular volunteer and respond to these motivations when describing what needs doing. Be aware that volunteers who are involved because they want to give back to their community may feel overwhelmed by the need to give support to many other charities at the moment.

### Think about the task in advance.

- It helps volunteers and you to be clearer about what is involved and avoids wasting everyone's time.
- Why is this important now? Make a clear link to your current priorities and your mission
- Will any equipment will be needed?
- What's involved - can you break the task down into stages?
- Will some over the phone support or training be needed? Can you signpost to online training or information?
- Who will keep in touch with the volunteer about the task and how often will you check in with each other?

### Risk assess

It is possible to 'risk assess' home working environments – you should discuss this with the volunteer.

Agree how you will share work and in **what format** to avoid problems half way through

Discuss how you can overcome any specific **access needs** the volunteer has, that may affect the task, together. Don't assume, invite the volunteer to share information.

### Stay connected

Stay connected in the ways you've agreed with the volunteer that you will do so. Respect volunteers' right to privacy.

Make sure you keep volunteers' personal and sensitive **data** safe. Think through your procedures if working from a personal computer.

Poole Museum is holding weekly virtual coffee mornings with volunteers, or phone calls for volunteers who aren't online.

## Safeguarding

If working with vulnerable adults, or children, always consider **safeguarding**.

If volunteers are under 18, or vulnerable, you need to put in place **safe working practices** for communicating online with these volunteers when they are volunteering from home. If in doubt, consult your safeguarding lead.

Whoever communicates with younger or vulnerable volunteers should have received in depth safeguarding awareness training. You should have agreed, as a team, some simple ways of ensuring you keep all volunteers safe in their dealings with the Museum.

If in doubt, stop and consider your ways of working together. Now might be a good time to ask trustees, management committee members, the safeguarding lead and those whose roles may involve contact with vulnerable adults or children now or in future to refresh their understanding of safeguarding and perhaps to take an online course. Here are some useful places to start:

- Your local authority safeguarding team
- NCVO website - <https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/your-team/volunteers/keeping/safeguarding-volunteers>
- NSPCC website – <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/training/safeguarding-charity-trustees>

## Expenses

Repay **receiptable expenses** in line with your museum's policy, where applicable for this kind of volunteering. Remember volunteering is time and effort freely given and expenses should be repaid **only** on agreed and receipted expenditure. Equally, don't assume a volunteer can volunteer without the payment of expenses. To avoid confusion, have a chat about it.

## Celebrate success

Celebrate with both the volunteer responsible and the wider team, however mundane the task may seem. Everyone likes to feel appreciated.

Remember that distance volunteering can still be **'counted' by your museum** as part of the vital difference volunteering makes to your organisation. Volunteer management systems with portals (such as Better Impact or Volunteer Makers) can help to track the contribution, so that you can report it to funders and stakeholders.

### Want to know more?

<https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/how-to/how-to-set-up-a-microvolunteering-project>  
<https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/how-to/how-to-engage-people-into-microvolunteering>

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