

MERL Case Study

Over the past six years, the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) at the University of Reading has been developing its volunteer training programme with the aim of involving volunteers in as many aspects of the University's programmes for museums and special collections as possible.

As Kate Arnold-Forster, Director of MERL and Head of University Museums and Special Collections Services, comments:

'The development of a coordinated programme of volunteer development across all our museums and collections has transformed virtually every aspect of our activities, especially our capacity to address large-scale collections management projects and increasingly to extend the scale and reach of our engagement programmes.'

As a university museum MERL is expected to demonstrate its contribution to both the academic and local community and so faces the challenge of ensuring it delivers services and programmes that meet the needs of a wide range of audiences. In this sense, the approach to volunteer management at MERL is no different to how the Museum has to plan other parts of its programmes: training opportunities and volunteer projects need to attract members of the local community and students alike and offer opportunities for participation, training and engagement to suit a variety of needs.

Through the VFM project the Museum was able to review its existing volunteer management practice, and identify and implement a programme to refine and improve its systems. The main focus therefore of the MERL involvement in this project was on resourcing bespoke and specialist training. A key priority was not only to enhance existing volunteer skills and knowledge, but to explore new areas of volunteering and how these could be built up through support and training made available through the project.

In particular, the project allowed the Museum to embark on a scheme to introduce the volunteers to work in the front of house and reception areas and to develop greater involvement with outreach, advocacy and learning programmes. Working with the front of house team, for example, had previously been seen as an activity where it was difficult to use volunteers because of the relatively complex processes required at reception to deal with the many different requirements of visitors to site. However, with careful planning and gaining staff agreement, the Museum was able to embark on vital *Welcome Host* and communications training for volunteers while time was also found for 'front line' staff to support additional volunteer training in managing the shop and in gaining the necessary knowledge and confidence to answer the types of enquiries that new visitors are likely to have. Other training built on existing areas of volunteer activity by providing opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills relating to archive and collections care.

In summary, this project offered a chance for the Museum to review current practice and develop new strategies for managing and working with volunteers. Probably the most helpful aspect of this process was the chance to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of our existing programmes and to take steps to improve and enhance them. Volunteer focus groups were held which allowed staff to see beyond the numbers and practical achievements and understand more about the volunteer experience from their perspective. The Museum's volunteer coordinator was also able to undertake evaluation to assess how well the volunteer programme was addressing the needs of volunteers. Staff with a responsibility for projects that involve volunteers were also able to undertake volunteer management training to make sure that these skills and knowledge were not solely confined to the volunteer post.

Finally, one of the main legacies will be that the project allowed the Museum to enrol in the *Investors in Volunteers* scheme. This will involve a year long process of assessment to reach the standard. It will involve further work on refining our policies and in demonstrating our commitment to good practice.

Rob Davies, Volunteer Coordinator:

'My post has benefited immeasurably from the opportunities of this project through the resourcing of staff and volunteer development. With the help of the project I have been able to extend and improve my skills and knowledge and hence the support I can offer. We have seen a real change in volunteering at MERL as a result of the project, especially in the new roles we have been able to create and through the team building aspects of much of the training.'