

Wycombe Museum

Case Study

Wycombe Museum has undertaken research into the attitudes of local Asian and African-Caribbean communities towards the Museum. By identifying potential volunteers and projects that can be volunteer-led, this research has allowed the Museum to develop a grass roots approach to diversifying its volunteer team and to developing community programming

All museums strive towards inclusivity, but as a local authority museum in a multi-cultural town Wycombe Museum wanted to actively address the needs of its local community and improve diversity in its volunteer team.

At the beginning of this project Wycombe Museum already had a strong volunteer team and many volunteer management structures were already in place. Grace Wilson, their volunteer co-ordinator, shared skills with other regional professionals via the Volunteers forum and directly advised Oxfordshire Museums with their volunteer development.

Museum Manager Zara Luxford states:

'our volunteers' work is valued across the Museum and investing in volunteers is definitely worth it.'

However, staff were concerned that their visitor and volunteer profile did not match the ethnic profile of the people who lived in the local area. A recent oral history project had put the Museum in touch with a number of community groups and staff wanted to build on these relationships

The 'Volunteers for Museums' project allowed Wycombe Museum to join with the Chiltern Open Air Museum in employing consultant Daffodil Forbes to work with these and other community groups to explore barriers to inclusion. The research found that there was a general lack of awareness about what the Museums offered for local people. Community members also generated a number of innovative ideas for community focussed events and activities, which Wycombe Museum plans to develop over the coming years. A number of new volunteers have been attracted to the Museum and three groups are now working directly with the Museum.

Museum Manager Zara Luxford and Visitor Services Officer Grace Wilson note:

'It has been especially good to have had Daffodil Forbes to research and develop links with local groups. The hands-on approach she took to her research has led to the development some strong new relationships, particularly with a local Asian womens' group and African-Caribbean groups. These relationships have already resulted in the development of specific programming and volunteering. It's been great to have someone working so closely with us to develop more inclusive services. We would have found it very difficult to resource such a project without support through 'Volunteers for Museums.'

Strategic work with communities

Wycombe Museum already had a strong volunteer management policy and staff at the museum were keen to share their skills with other local museums. With a small staff they were also aware that their volunteer numbers were already hitting capacity. However, they knew that this shouldn't make them complacent in tackling the issue of diversity head on.

The project not only strengthened existing contacts with Asian and African-Caribbean communities it also helped the Museum to understand how it was perceived by non-visitors. By asking members of various groups, to make suggestions and offering them the opportunity to develop their ideas on a voluntary basis, the project employed a grass roots approach to inclusion. This also allowed the museum to increase visitor capacity without over stretching its limited staff and volunteer resources.

The research found that there was a general lack of awareness amongst local Asian and African-Caribbean residents about what the museum offered for visitors. This project was the first step in raising awareness and Daffodil has succeeded in breaking down some of the barriers to participation. It is important that the Museum now takes on board the findings of Daffodil's research and seeks ways to sustain and build on the relationships established through support from 'Volunteers for Museums'.

Daffodil is staying on as a volunteer at Wycombe Museum and plans are already underway for more community focussed activities.