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## Volunteering flagship at Leicestershire County Museums

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### **Background to Leicestershire County Council Volunteering**

Volunteering in the Environment and Heritage Sector has always taken place, but in the past mainly in an *ad-hoc* and un-tracked manner. In 2006, work was undertaken to assess the level of volunteering across these service areas to identify the nature and scope of opportunities, and to try to identify gaps in service provision. The work identified a number of volunteer types:

- Benevolent/altruistic volunteer – ad-hoc or regular duties around a subject or site,
- “Virtual volunteer” – the home-based volunteer
- Event volunteer - conservation tasks, employee volunteering opportunities
- Member of Friends group - associated with a particular museum/ project
- Full time/part-time placement - students from university/volunteer secondment, school/sheltered placements
- Arms length/remote – Wardens in their own communities

The assessment, supported by additional work in 2009 around the Natural Life Collections, looked at barriers to volunteering both from potential applicants and also staff. For some people expenses are an issue, although many choose not to claim what is offered. However, almost without exception, volunteers do like tea and biscuits and recognition! Expenses are now offered at 40p a mile, or public transport costs.

In summary, people volunteer to

- Gain new skills
- Gain work experience
- Have the chance to make a difference
- Meet new people
- Have fun
- Follow a passion for their field of interest – and share it!
- Build confidence

As an outcome of this work, a bid was made to the local Museums Libraries and Archives office in 2007 for pilot work to establish a “Community Services” Volunteer Co-ordinator and standardise processes to meet best practice guidance. This work used existing Induction and Staff Guidance packs developed for museums, along with national guidance, and new updated and enhanced guidelines and information for staff were produced. It has also standardised processes and procedures across service areas and co-ordinated approaches for museums, arts, heritage, environmental and library services. The post of Volunteer Co-ordinator is supported by a network of Service Champions. Staff receive regular updates, standard literature and training opportunities for recruiting and supporting volunteers. This support has resolved many staff concerns identified. In addition there is a central volunteers’ expenses budget.

It is now known across these service areas that there are over 200 regular volunteers every year, plus many more Friends groups, work placements and community wardens. In a 45 week reviewed period, almost 19,000 volunteer hours were provided to support these services. With the average Leicestershire wage being £11.83 (UK average of £12.55 per hour) this equates to nearly £250,000 worth of time gifted.

In March 2010, many of the Natural Life volunteers joined an afternoon cream tea reception hosted by the Chairman of Leicestershire County Council. This is part of a recognition package for volunteers developed by the team. The Natural Life volunteer team are also being put forward for the Corporate “Star” Award that acknowledges volunteer contribution.

Formal volunteering is defined as “giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations which support social, environmental, cultural or sporting objectives”. (Source: *Briefing note for Local Strategic Partnerships: NI6 “Participation in regular volunteering”, Cabinet Office*)

In the Communities and Wellbeing Service, where museums are now based, the total revenue budget is approximately £10m. This means external funding is critical. £13m has been secured through challenge funding for heritage and arts over the last three years, providing 86% of total project funding. This equates to 27 projects currently, much covering non-statutory functions, so volunteering can bring much added value to these bids that ask for “volunteer contributions” as matched funding. Indeed the VIP (Volunteering, Internship and Placement) project in North West Leicestershire has received funding through the Local Area Agreement board.

### **Volunteering Flagship at Leicestershire County Council Museums Collection Team**

The Collections Resources Centre provides a unique resource for volunteers to work with museum collections outside museum sites. Volunteers in 2009 worked within Archaeology (five registered), Costume (five registered volunteers), Fine Art (one registered) and Natural Life (thirty two registered).

The Natural Life (NL) Collections Team, based at this site, has been keen to engage greater numbers and improve the volunteer experience, through training and new approaches to collections care and management. Previously collections focused volunteering had been at the curator’s discretion and on an *ad-hoc* basis – often restricted to local naturalists. Just two people volunteered on an occasional basis. However:

- Volunteers are changing
- There is a need for the service to diversify our workforce bringing new skills to our teams
- We need to reach out to our local communities
- Volunteers have higher expectations

Volunteering opportunities available with the natural history collections have received a boost as the Centre has been awarded Renaissance East Midlands Volunteering Flagship status at the start of 2010. In recognition of work championed by the Natural Life Team and development of best practice approaches to policies, support mechanisms and recruitment methods developed in recent years. The Centre’s application and initial assessments for the baseline have indicated that the service works to a high standard and meets the good practice standards required.

The Flagship award will allow developments across the various subject disciplines of the whole Collections Team and regular inter-disciplinary volunteering days, as well as subject specialist tasks. This will benefit volunteers through peer-to-peer learning, diversification of opportunities and greater training opportunities. A small pot of money can be bid for as part of this programme and will be used to enhance the “volunteering work space”.

Part of our work plan for the future is to share what we have learnt, broaden our offer working with colleagues across the Collections Resources Centre, as well as to learn from others who work with Natural Life Collection volunteers.

### **Natural Life Volunteering**

Pilot work with Natural Life collections has shown there is significant opportunity for growth and development of the volunteering opportunities on offer. This highlighted opportunities beyond subject specialist interest, and new approaches. A good example of this is our home-based volunteers (whether excluded due to rural location or personal circumstance).

Natural Life headline outcomes between April 2009 and April 2010

- Registered 32 new volunteers working from home, at events, or directly on the collections.
- Volunteers contributed over 2,300 hours on work related to the Natural Life Collections.
- Over half of this time has been at the Collections Resources Centre, working on collections man-

agement for just 2 days a week.

- The national average hourly wage (£12.55) means this equates to a donation of £28,865.
- Advertising for volunteers was only via two local newsletter articles, although role descriptions are clearly defined and advertised on the Do-It! web site ([www.do-it.org](http://www.do-it.org)). and also through local Volunteer Centre Networks and the volunteering pages on the LCC website.
- Many volunteers have come forward following on from events with the Collections team, word of mouth, or promotion of the collections in local media, web etc. Indeed a number of our volunteers are now contributing tales of their experiences on our Curator's Blog.

Working with the collections is not just about the specimens alone. Volunteers have brought their skills and added value to what we do. Their assistance and enthusiasm has helped us to provide greater access and opportunities for local groups and the public alike, unlocking archives and discovering stories behind the specimens. All of this has helped enhance the collections, bringing new audiences to the heart of museums.

### The Library

The Natural History collections are supported by a comprehensive library collected since the 1850s. It has a wide range of books, journals and papers from technical research to “coffee table” informative books. Serious researchers and school students alike get inspiration and information from this extensive resource.

Volunteers, including trained librarians, have driven the work on the library (Fig. 1). It has been moved nearer the collections, and ordered by the Dewey Classification System. Books have been assessed for restoration and are now being fully catalogued on Mimsy XG, the museums cataloguing system. Since September, once the moves/ordering were complete, nearly 500 books have been added to this catalogue, working on it one day a week.

A volunteer book-binder has assisted with restoring books that have displayed signs of wear and tear. She volunteered, having seen the books at a visit, and hearing our desire to see them restored. Working from home, since May 2009, nearly 20 books from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century collection have had binding stabilised, spines restored, gold-leaf text of the title added and loose pages re-inserted. All the work is photographed, helping us document the care of this archive.



**Fig. 1.** Volunteers are helping catalogue the extensive library that support the collections.

Another volunteer is fluent in several languages. This has helped us provide abstracts for foreign journals and publications bought by past curators and collectors, which helps unlock information and makes the library and resources further accessible.

A bonus has been people having a chance to look through the hundreds of books we hold. This means not only are they health checked, but interesting illustrations and annotations book-marked for use at tours. This work on the library has been the inspiration behind bids to a local society that has surplus money, and to local Charitable Trusts, which would allow us to develop a fund to purchase current specialist identification books for use by County Recorders with the collections. It would also fill gaps in the Leicestershire historical and contemporary wildlife/naturalists bibliography, a list that has been compiled by local naturalists.

### Photographing the Collections

Following an article in Branchline, a local heritage newsletter, about the developments within the Natural Life team and volunteering opportunities, a local photographer contacted the team in June 2009 offering her assistance in digitally photographing aspects of the collections. As a busy mum, she joined the team after the summer holidays, with her friend (also a keen photographer). Joining the team once a fortnight, they have photographed 1,800 images from the flowering plant herbarium.

A home-based volunteer then works to rename the images with the plant's scientific name, and to catalogue the data from the specimen labels. This means their time is best used to make maximum benefit of their skills in capturing the images. This process is unlocking a vast amount of information about this collection in a new format.

This approach has since been taken when working on other collection areas, such as zoology, and also, how as a Centre, we utilise the photographic suite.

### Collections Care

A volunteer team has developed since April 2009 that assists with "health checking" the collections. This helps us maintain the high standard of care. Each week (using an Excel random number generator established by a volunteer!) they select cabinets from the zoology collection to check for signs of physical damage, pests, or issues with pins that hold the fragile insects. This is then catalogued in cabinet note books (prepared by a home-based volunteer) and an electronic archive that also documents remedial work collated (the latter being done by one of the volunteers to ease pressures on the PCs on the days they are in). They also undertake weekly store vacuuming. This has freed up the Curator's time for specialist projects, but also links to their work programme of remedial work by providing a targeted action plan.

The team have helped with general tasks which include reorganisation of archives and stored resources, such as publications, consumables and equipment (Figs. 2-4). They also are keen to help re-file and catalogue additional material and documents in all the history files relating to the collections. The Volunteer Collections Care team has:

- initiated an archive of what is held in the cabinets;
- cleaned the glass on over 750 cabinet drawers – twice!
- bagged and frozen over 2,000 higher plant specimens;
- repackaged and cleaned the reference collection of UK bird and mammal skins (and written procedural guidance notes for future volunteers);
- helped produce a catalogue of all specimens that relate to protected species lists;
- re-packed geology specimens that had signs of pyrites decay;
- re-organised the teaching taxidermy collection into scientific checklist order, during a house keeping day (where we buy the volunteers fish and chip lunches!).



**Fig. 2.** Volunteers have generated project ideas such as re-packaging and cleaning the zoology skin collections.



As a weekly “fall back” task the team also assist with producing an index for the Personalia files (documents about local naturalists and collectors). This then identifies key documents that might be suitable for the home-based volunteers to fully transcribe or research.



**Fig. 3.** Volunteers assisting with general collections care, including spot checking specimens for pests.



**Fig. 4.** Volunteers assisting with general collections care, and updating documentation of specimens.

### Specialist Collection Work

A number of local naturalists (including County Recorders, who have special interest in a particular wildlife group) have also volunteered to work on the collections, assisting with specimen identification and documentation of data from the specimen labels. In the past naturalists had primarily visited for identifications, or used the collections as a reference. Whilst this added value to the collections, it was not volunteering! We have targeted this group through visits and talks at AGMs, County Recorder Network meetings and local conferences etc.

We now actively encourage their assistance in re-identifying/determining specimens and re-curating groups to new checklists. This work has allowed the data from the specimens to be captured and can then be passed

to the County Recorders and colleagues at the Historic and Natural Environment Team, who have an interest in Leicestershire wildlife records (Fig. 5). Again, volunteers working at home often assist with transcribing this data.



**Fig. 5.** Local Naturalists (including County Recorders) assist with curation, specimen identification and documentation of data from the specimen labels.

Volunteers have assisted with Lepidoptera (butterflies and moths), Tipulidae (crane flies) and Hymenoptera (bees, and wasps) collections. Some of this work has included taking specimens from the store boxes (the way collections are donated to the service by collectors, or transferred at disaggregation in 1997) and migrating them to the main collections. This makes them more accessible to local naturalists. We can also identify specimens with no data, or where we have an excess, for use in handling, teaching or displays.

Following on from this initial work, local naturalists are now coming forward with ideas. A project has just begun to compress the storage of the smaller insect orders, where gaps have been left for future specimens (so we may only have a handful of specimens in a Hills Drawer). This will allow space to be created for transfer of future collections from the store boxes. This is a more efficient use of space, important in the current financial climates where cabinets will be harder to purchase.

Volunteers have also formed a “sub-group” that want to re-vitalise the spirit collections, currently on-loan for storage reasons to Leicester City Museum Service. This will involve cataloguing in greater detail and any “top-up” needed.

An additional outcome of the increased activity has been increased awareness of what we have to offer, so leading to increased use. In addition local naturalists are now volunteering to run identification courses using the collections. This donation of time is important and tracked too as a volunteer donation.

### Home based Volunteering

Leicestershire (excluding Leicester City) is a 70% rural county and not everyone can physically get to the Collections Resources Centre to volunteer. Home-based opportunities can overcome physical and mental well-being barriers, providing greater opportunities. Often volunteers will come and meet the team at the Store, but we often travel, or arrange to meet them at a convenient time/venue or event. This effort to meet them has been identified by the volunteers as being important.

Also many people who would like to assist the work of the Leicestershire Museums Service are in paid employment and can only attend evenings or weekends. Often they become “Event Volunteers”, who help take collections to local events and heritage/countryside shows (Fig. 6). In 2009, this meant the collections were seen by nearly 3,500 people visiting the Natural Life Collections stand and asking specific enquiries.



**Fig. 6.** Volunteers helping out at a countryside show, promoting the museums collections.

Home-based volunteering has been piloted by the Natural Life Collections team, in response to the interest raised through publicity in the spring of 2009. Home-based volunteers are a vital part of the Natural Life Volunteering team. Volunteers have assisted with:

- transfer of label detail records from paper-based transcripts to electronic archives;
- transcribing of hand-written/printed historical documents to electronic formats;
- re-organising slide archives;



- designing a contacts database that allows us to track bookings for events, enquiries and also volunteering hours;
- preparing lined unit trays for holding insect specimens;
- preparing note books for cataloguing the Natural Life cabinets;
- renaming digital images;
- researching the value of library books;
- research on various topics from local naturalists to interpretation for exhibitions and events!

Some tasks have been specific opportunities based on the interest and skills of volunteering offers. An expert volunteer with specific interest in the Carabidae (ground beetles), working from home in Warwickshire, donates at least half a day a week to document, clean and re-mount specimens from the main reference collection. Rather than paying his expenses, since he is registered disabled and could not get to the store, we contribute to his broadband access so he can network to use Mimsy XG remotely.

Another home-based employed volunteer heard of the need for covers for the team's teaching trays and osteological (skeleton) collection. These specimens are covered by Perspex domes, which are liable to scratch during transportation or cleaning. Fabric covers have helped protect them in transit and from dust accumulation. Since you then cannot see the specimen, she suggested embroidering the name, so the team can identify which specimens are out on loan. She has subsequently designed covers for teaching trays in Hills Drawers. These covers have generated enquiries from other services. The clear guidance on how to carry these trays also helps to ensure the specimens' safety. She will now volunteer with the Costume Collections Team, helping with preparing covers for their collections.

Following on from this, a volunteer, who is interested in design, has developed packs of guidance notes on caring for the collections when on loan, and signs for when they are being used. Working with the handling collections, a subsequent project was to develop an ideas pack based around creative tasks inspired from the specimens. These may not be priorities, but they add value, and make it easier for us as staff in the longer-term.

### **Key lessons learnt and thoughts based on the Leicestershire experience**

#### **Customer Care**

- Do not assume only local experts can help you!
- Remember tea, coffee and a nice packet of biscuits can go a long way in gaining goodwill and giving time for volunteers and staff to get to know each other.
- Find out when volunteers birthdays are and do remember cake!

#### **Being Responsive**

- Listen to their interests and see if you can tailor make projects that may not be your priority, but would assist you.
- Let people have the chance to input ideas :- new eyes can lead to new solutions, often more efficient or effective.

#### **Data Acquisition**

- Ask for feedback; those comment cards could be a valuable evidence base.
- Ask volunteers to track how much time they do at home and explain why you need this information.

#### **Communication**

- Remember to say thank you.
- Do not forget the home-based volunteers, perhaps by a quarterly email of news and annual gathering.

When looking at a role, identify:

- Flexibility – people may not like something when they start – Is there a fall-back
- A task where they can see they are making a difference
- Clear goals
- Variety
- How the task can be broken down to small chunks. Can some be done by people at home?
- Contact with other people. Remember for some it will be their only social interaction
- Resources needed for the task. Make sure you have them so you don't lead to disappointment

The recruitment process:

- If you are looking for a certain skill set, think through the criteria you need and specifics of the role, so you can select people who are appropriate for the role. Could it be done by more than one person if no one person fitted the skill set?
- Have a clear framework for supervision and dealing with problems.
- Do not make it too much like a job application process. People are offering you a “gift”. However do take up references if people are working in the store or with confidential records, for example by phone.
- Use best practice guidance available through Volunteering England and local Volunteer Centres.

### **The future demographics - What does it hold for volunteering?**

- Fewer older people will be volunteering purely for reasons of civic duty and participants (such as those from the post-war generation) will want to be treated as colleagues, not just as workers.
- Volunteering experiences will need to provide fulfilment at a number of levels. Roles must be tailored to suit, with tangible outcomes for all.
- ‘Older’ volunteers will be time-poor, but there will be many more of them. (Analysts suggest by 2023 a larger percentage of the UK population will be over 50 than under.) Breaking down tasks or allowing people to work from home could be a way to provide greater opportunities.
- For volunteers of the future, museum volunteering may be just one of many community roles undertaken. Museum volunteering may have to be slotted into schedules, so flexibility within roles will be vital.
- New approach to volunteering that identifies more tasks and mixing and matching, so people receive fulfilment in terms of their motivation for volunteering, whether it be interest, skills development or leisure.
- Recruitment will need to emphasise how volunteering can be personally fulfilling and the benefits that can be gained. This will require a new way of thinking for some staff.
- Appropriate systems and structures: recruitment (informal) and marketing need to be developed.
- Recognition of the volunteer contribution: inclusive/social and physical needs.
- Recognise we need more younger volunteers and more targeting of younger people. However many younger volunteers have different aspirations. They may want a more ‘laid back’ environment, skills development, the chance to utilise technology, with an outcome that will add value to their employment prospects. A skills-based approach that combines a fun, supportive environment is likely to be an increased requirement.
- An appreciation that successful volunteering is based on a relationship model that sees volunteering as one element within a suite of activities that support the Service’s mission. Volunteers can act as advocates and champions at the community level.