Volunteer, engage, learn

A new volunteer programme at the Natural History Museum
Advance organisers leading school group
This report has been written by Nick Ockenden and Joanna Machin at the Institute for Volunteering Research in partnership with Margarita Petri and Beth Stone at the Natural History Museum.

Published by the Natural History Museum 2007

The report
This report will:
• describe the impacts of the Learning Volunteer Programme
• assess the outcomes of the programme against its original objectives
• share knowledge and offer guidance to other cultural organisations considering development of a learning volunteer programme

About the research
This report is based on evaluation and impact assessments of the Natural History Museum’s Learning Volunteer Programme. The research was carried out by the Institute for Volunteering Research on behalf of, and in partnership with, the Natural History Museum between November 2006 and April 2007.

Methods
• two focus groups with volunteers (the first with five and the second with eight participants)
• a survey of 60 current volunteers and a survey of two former volunteers
• testimonials from six volunteers
• interviews with six key members of staff
• two focus groups with members of staff (each with six participants)
• a survey of 38 members of staff
• observations of 48 volunteer-led sessions in the Focus Point facilitator and learning activator roles
• surveys with 91 visitors following their interaction with volunteers

Acknowledgements
The Institute for Volunteering Research and the Natural History Museum would like to thank everyone involved in the production of this report. We are especially indebted to the Museum volunteers, staff and visitors who took the time to speak with researchers and complete questionnaires.

The Natural History Museum would like to thank all the organisations whose expertise and experience informed the development of the Learning Volunteer Programme: Volunteering England; Denver Museum of Nature and Science; the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC and its associated museums and zoo; the British Museum; Kew Gardens; the Science Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum. Finally, the Museum extends a heartfelt thank you to all the Learning volunteers who have contributed their time, talents and energy to making the Learning Volunteer Programme a success. This report celebrates their achievements.

About the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR)
IVR is a specialist research and consultancy agency focusing on volunteering. It is an initiative of Volunteering England and the University of East London and was set up in 1997 in response to the increased demand for research on volunteering. Over the past 10 years, IVR has carried out a wide variety of research, consultancy and evaluation projects on many different aspects of volunteering. It has conducted four national surveys of volunteering and worked with a range of partners. For more information, please visit www.ivr.org.uk

About the Natural History Museum
The Natural History Museum is home to the nation’s finest collection of natural history specimens. It looks after and develops this collection and uses it to promote the discovery, understanding, responsible use and enjoyment of the natural world. Originally part of the British Museum, it opened its doors in South Kensington, London, in 1881, and since 1937 it has included the Natural History Museum at Tring, in Hertfordshire.

The Natural History Museum is one of the UK’s top visitor attractions, with more than three million people every year enjoying exhibitions, events and education programmes. Learning is central to the Museum’s mission and it provides specialist support, collaboration and resources for education, from school programmes to PhDs. The Museum is also a world-renowned institute for knowledge on the diversity of the natural world, actively using its collections and scientific expertise to research global problems such as disease, climate change and threats to the Earth’s biodiversity. For more information, please visit www.nhm.ac.uk
I have been a Learning volunteer for several months now and I can say the experience has far exceeded my initial expectations. The training was very interesting and in-depth, covering many areas including strategies for facilitating learning interactions. Our schedule is extremely varied so the roles remain fresh and stimulating.

Each learning interaction is unique and teaches us something new. Roaming the Mammals gallery, which houses the blue whale, is my favourite activity as the mammal skulls we carry around tend to attract great responses. What makes volunteering at the Museum so much fun – besides the cute and crazy kids – is that all the other volunteers and staff are friendly and supportive. I really feel at home here.

Shayna, 29, volunteer
The Natural History Museum has a rich and longstanding relationship with volunteers. They extend our capacity, help deliver corporate goals and link with government agendas for lifelong learning and active citizenship. This input adds enormous value to our work.

The Learning Volunteer Programme is a new initiative in our galleries, and this evaluation report clearly demonstrates that the programme enhances our ability to offer valuable learning experiences for visitors and contributes positively to our diversity and culture.

There are more than 300 volunteers at the Museum, in many different roles, from assistants in the Wildlife Garden to Scientific Associates who extend our capacity to manage and develop our collections and generate new knowledge. Indeed, members of our Board of Trustees are volunteers, providing oversight and governance.

The contribution of all our volunteers is highly valued and they are an integral part of the Museum as a learning organisation. By evaluating these kinds of initiatives we can better apply our volunteer resource and support our volunteers to achieve their own learning ambitions.

Dr Michael Dixon
Director, the Natural History Museum

I am learning new things every day from other volunteers and the public, having fantastic fun, gaining experience in museum work, education and natural history vital for my future career. I’m also really enjoying working with other volunteers and learning about their interests and experiences. Most of all I get such a lovely feeling when I can see that the child or adult has taken something from our interaction. Something in the smile or look in the eye that tells you they will remember it.

Garrie, 26, volunteer

Learning activator in Mammals gallery
The Learning Volunteer Programme is a new initiative, launched in 2005 and based in the Museum’s galleries. The programme’s aims are to:

- increase opportunities for visitors to enjoy and engage meaningfully with the Museum’s exhibitions and collections, by involving volunteers in the delivery of face-to-face learning activities
- promote lifelong learning through supporting volunteer learning needs, in an ongoing training and enrichment programme

Aspirations for the programme are that it should:

- be of mutual benefit to the Museum and the volunteers
- reflect good practice and current thinking in volunteer management and support
- encourage participation of individuals from a diversity of backgrounds and age groups
- have a positive impact on the museum sector, setting high standards for volunteer engagement

At the time of writing this report, the Learning Volunteer Programme is a highly visible programme in the Museum’s galleries, involving a team of 73 volunteers who inspire and enthuse the full range of Museum audiences in quality learning activities. The volunteers benefit from a programme of valuable learning opportunities that can lead to progression in knowledge and skills, boost employability and also extend social networks.

The programme was developed in consultation with organisations that involve volunteers, in the UK and abroad, and with key stakeholders and trade unions at the Museum. A new, comprehensive Museum-wide volunteer policy underpins the programme and an inclusive recruitment strategy is in place. The Learning volunteers have specially developed and clearly defined roles and are supported by relevant training, personalised learning plans and intensive input from dedicated staff.

Evaluation of the programme was carried out in 2007 by the Institute for Volunteering Research in partnership with the Museum. The aim of the evaluation was to assess the impacts of the programme and to inform future development. This report is based on the findings of the evaluation.

Impacts of the programme on the Museum and its visitors

- Learning volunteers are effective in extending the Museum’s capacity for face-to-face interaction with visitors. In one year, volunteers were responsible for 76,400 interactions with visitors, 59,000 of whom were children*.
- Visitors were overwhelmingly positive about their interactions with Learning volunteers, rating the enjoyment of their experiences highly.
- Seventy-three per cent of visitors surveyed said their behaviour in the Museum would change as a result of interacting with the volunteers. Many said their experience with the volunteers would influence what they did during the present visit and on future visits.
- Learning volunteers make a regular and frequent commitment to the Museum. In 2006/2007, they gave 6,500 hours to the Museum.
- The Learning Volunteer Programme supports the Museum’s corporate objectives by:
  - delivering learning opportunities
  - engaging with a larger, diverse audience
  - creating scientifically literate citizens
  - inspiring a life-long commitment to the natural world
- Learning volunteers have a positive impact on many Museum staff, who are motivated by the energy, enthusiasm and dedication of the volunteers.

* During term time, Learning volunteers count interactions with under 16s in family groups and under 16s in school groups. At weekends and school holidays, Learning volunteers count interactions with under 16s and adults, which is the main reason for fewer recorded adult interactions.
Impacts of the programme on the Learning volunteers

- Volunteers clearly expressed their enjoyment of volunteering at the Museum.
- Volunteers commented very positively on the programme’s recruitment procedures and the training sessions that prepared them for their roles.
- The volunteer team shows greater diversity than usual for the museum sector, particularly in terms of age.
- The high level of support provided by programme managers is recognised and appreciated by volunteers.
- Volunteers value the ongoing learning and enrichment programme. Social events, where volunteers can meet each other and Museum staff, are particularly enjoyed.

- Among the many benefits of the programme reported by volunteers were the facilities for extending their knowledge of natural history and science, acquisition of team and leadership skills, gains in confidence and increased employability. Ten Learning volunteers have been appointed to paid positions within the Museum since the start of the programme.
- Volunteers often said they felt proud to be part of the Museum, which is evidence of their integration.

Guidance for other museums

The evaluation of the Learning Volunteer Programme highlighted many aspects of good practice that can benefit other organisations. Key areas of success were identified as:

- organisational commitment and understanding of volunteering
- comprehensive volunteer support
- good relations between paid staff and volunteers
Learning activator in Ice Station Antarctica
Volunteers play a vital role in museums, with more than 25,000 estimated to be involved. In roles ranging from trustees to educators, volunteers help museums extend their reach, providing essential additional capacity and adding value. As many as one in three museums are entirely volunteer run.

Volunteering at the Natural History Museum

Volunteers have been associated with the Museum almost from the moment the doors opened in 1881. Today, there is a formalised ‘behind the scenes’ volunteer programme engaging more than 200 volunteers in a diverse range of projects and tasks within Science departments and the Wildlife Garden. The Museum recognises the value of volunteers in helping to fulfil its mission and is committed to providing rewarding, enriching experiences for its volunteers.

The Learning Volunteer Programme is a new initiative launched by the Museum’s Department for Learning in June 2005. The concept of Learning volunteers was developed in the Strategy for Learning (2003) which inspired significant changes in the way the Museum engages with visitors.

A needs analysis identified two key priorities for the Learning Volunteer Programme:

- to extend opportunities for Museum visitors to engage in quality learning experiences in the galleries
- to enhance the provision of valuable lifelong learning opportunities for adult audiences in the Museum

The Learning Volunteer Programme was set up with the following objectives:

- to benefit Museum visitors by enhancing the provision of face-to-face learning opportunities in the Museum’s galleries
- to benefit the volunteers as lifelong learners by offering them stimulating and developmental learning experiences
- to develop a diverse volunteer team with a variety of ages, backgrounds and ethnicities by means of an inclusive approach to recruitment
- to provide an inclusive visitor offer where volunteers engage with the full range of Museum audiences: family groups, schools and adults, of all abilities and backgrounds
- to align with good practice in volunteer management by consultation with experts in the field of volunteering
- to have a positive impact on the Museum’s culture by promoting and facilitating the integration of volunteers into the organisation
- to support corporate goals by developing the programme in line with the Museum’s Corporate Plan
- to raise awareness within the museum sector by achieving high standards in volunteer engagement

The Learning Volunteer Programme

The Learning Volunteer Programme is a highly visible initiative in the Museum’s galleries, where a diverse team of 73 volunteers delivers enjoyable, high-quality learning experiences to the full range of audiences. Through training and an ongoing enrichment programme, volunteers can develop their knowledge and skills, increase their employability and widen their social contacts.

Programme development

Consultation with volunteer organisations, in particular Volunteering England, supported the early stages of the programme’s development. Good practice examples from national and international museums and other cultural organisations were applied. The programme was then developed with Museum senior management, cross-departmental teams, trade unions and colleagues within the Department for Learning.

Recruitment

Applicants do not need any particular skills, experience or qualifications to join the programme. The only essential criteria are a passion for the natural world and a desire to communicate with and enthuse others.

Specially designed promotional materials (posters and postcards) are available at venues such as libraries, Volunteer Centres, Job Centres and colleges, places accessible to the wider local community and beyond. Applications can be made through the Museum’s website and advertisements appear in the London press.

An informal interview enables applicants to meet programme managers, learn about the programme and discuss the aspirations they have for volunteering. All applicants are screened for working with children and vulnerable adults through references and CRB checks.

Training

Core training is given to recruits and prepares them for their role. Five intensive sessions are led by programme managers and stakeholders from across the Museum. Themes covered are:

- introduction to the Museum
- the nature of museum learning
- communication skills and questioning strategies
- informal learning theory
- the nature of science
- learning from objects
- a background to natural history
- health and safety and gallery procedures
- customer care

The ongoing learning and support programme for volunteers includes taught courses, field trips, behind-the-scenes tours and offsite Museum events, as well as parties and other social events. The Museum is committed to helping volunteers realise their aspirations in joining the programme and to gain the kind of skills that are transferable and lead to progression in learning or employment.

Volunteer support

A high level of support underpins the programme and is fundamental to its success. Each morning, volunteers are briefed by a programme manager before going out on the galleries. The programme manager is available throughout the day for support and to monitor activities. The day ends with a debrief, where any issues from the day can be discussed.

Volunteers are encouraged to take part in departmental and Museum-wide meetings and social events, and integrate themselves in the life of the organisation.
Volunteer roles and activities

Good education practice informs the development of learning activities at the Museum. The aim is to develop enjoyable experiences that promote investigation and discovery, providing choices that give the visitor control of their own learning. Such experiences are powerful and promote learning that not only increases knowledge and skills, but also affects attitudes and behaviour. Volunteers use real Museum specimens to encourage reflection and questioning, making learning enjoyable and memorable.

There are currently three Learning volunteer activities. Each involves volunteers in a defined role, specifically developed and distinct from the roles of paid staff.

- **Focus Point facilitators**
  Focus Points are accessible gallery trolleys, specifically designed for the Learning Volunteer Programme. They contain selected Museum specimens that visitors can handle and explore. Volunteers engage school groups, families and adults in enquiry-based learning. The activities aim to enhance learning about any nearby exhibits.

- **Learning activators**
  Volunteers walk around specific galleries with eye-catching Museum specimens, enthusing and inspiring visitors. These interactions aim to increase visitor learning within the galleries and are tailored to visitor needs.

- **Advance organisers**
  Volunteers provide a personalised service to school groups. They meet students as they arrive and set the scene for learning by encouraging observation and questioning from the outset of the visit.

Frequency of involvement

The Learning Volunteer Programme is flexible to volunteer needs and volunteers can choose when to give their time.

The majority spend at least one 4.5-hour day each week at the Museum. Departmental records show that in a year, Learning volunteers give more than 6,500 hours of their time to the Museum.

Financial implications

The Museum’s annual financial investment in the Learning Volunteer Programme is £30,000, plus associated costs of £45,000 for programme manager salaries. The value of volunteer time in financial terms is also considerable. The annual hours contributed by Learning volunteers equate to the hours worked by 3.6 full-time equivalent education staff with a total annual salary cost of more than £77,000.

This demonstrates the benefits to the Museum are other than financial. Crucially, it also demonstrates that successfully supporting volunteers and developing an effective volunteer programme requires sufficient levels of investment.

Diversity and backgrounds

Research suggests that volunteers in museums are drawn from a relatively narrow section of society. One survey found that 45 per cent were 65 or older. However, the Learning Volunteer Programme includes a broader range of ages. Only 15 per cent are aged 60 years or over, 57 per cent are between 18 and 34 and 28 per cent are between 35 and 59.

There are currently more female Learning volunteers (60 female to 18 male). The ethnic background of Learning volunteers is more diverse than the museum sector as a whole. The majority (83 per cent) of Learning volunteers define themselves as white, with 17 per cent describing themselves as coming from a non-white ethnic group. One study found 80 per cent of museums that responded to the study only had white volunteers.

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Quite often, little children would approach another child more readily than an adult. They have been along a couple of training sessions and things. The Museum has really welcomed them. I was quite nervous to say that I have to bring them in but it has just worked great.

Alison, Learning volunteer, talking about her children as Learning volunteers

An unexpected benefit

A surprise benefit of the programme has been that interested younger family members join the programme in school holidays. There are currently eight children who volunteer alongside their parents. This is a new and compelling form of engagement, as well as providing a novel experience for the Museum’s core audience of family groups.

The programme has successfully supported volunteers with disabilities by providing a high level of personalised support. Simon has visual impairment and uses a guide dog. Programme managers work closely with him to ensure his additional support requirements are met and that he has the same opportunities as everyone else. Simon has had a very positive impact on the programme and the Museum as a whole, providing advice and guidance on visual impairment and accessibility issues.

The Natural History Museum is my favourite museum, since I was small in Japan. I really wanted to go and I studied a Masters in museum studies. I was very keen to get involved in the Museum so when I found this programme I was very pleased and saw it as a way to get involved gradually.

Kaoru, 29, volunteer

I just love this place! I brought my children here and my girls like it, too. We saw the advert on the website and I couldn’t believe there was an opportunity to get involved and to feel a part of this place. In the morning when sunlight is hitting the building I look up and think I’m a part of that and it is so exciting! I feel like a kid.

Alison, 29, volunteer
The research shows clearly that the Learning Volunteer Programme has added value to the Museum’s face-to-face learning service.

Enhancing the visitor experience

In interviews, senior staff at the Museum said the programme and the Learning volunteers had fundamentally changed the visitor experience for the better and had increased visitor enjoyment. They commented on the enthusiasm and high-quality learning experiences that the volunteers provide.

The human element makes it more inviting for the public.

Staff member

To have interaction and the opportunity to handle specimens is a fantastic bonus for students.

Staff member

Most family groups, school groups and adult visitors meet volunteers at Focus Point trolleys and in the Learning activator role. Visitors are overwhelmingly positive about their experience. When asked to rate their experience on a scale of one to 10, the average score was nine. Visitors found the hands-on, interactive learning approach highly enjoyable, and liked the opportunity to touch specimens and engage on a one-to-one basis with the volunteers.

Many visitors said it was a completely new experience for them, and something they had not expected from a museum. Visitors were often seen laughing, handling specimens and asking questions. They spent a considerable amount of time engaging with the volunteers. On average, interactions lasted about six minutes, but could be as long as 25 minutes.

It’s added depth to our visit— we like to do more than just look. This is a whole new museum experience for us, and wow, it’s free as well.

Visitor

I think all museums should be doing this – it’s great to see all the kids talking, wanting to learn and interacting – fabulous.

Visitor

Seventy-three per cent of visitors said their experience with the volunteers would change their behaviour in the Museum. They said they would now look out for trolleys or Learning staff elsewhere in the Museum. Many also said they would now look more carefully and actively at exhibits and specimens. Some parents said they would use the approach demonstrated by the volunteers with their children as they went around the Museum – asking questions and seeking answers together, rather than looking passively at exhibits.

In 79 per cent of instances, visitors who interacted with volunteers did not know they were volunteers. Once visitors were told, their reaction was very positive, describing them as ‘passionate’, ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘committed’, highlighting the unique contribution of volunteers.

It’s a really special and rare thing that people give up their own time to help others – it’s great. We all should take a leaf out of their book.

Visitor

Thank goodness for people like this.

Visitor
It's highly commendable that people volunteer in such positions – I would love to see more of this.

Visitor

Helping the Museum achieve more

The impact of Learning volunteers is evident in the number of quality learning experiences they deliver. Monitoring data shows that between 2006 and 2007 volunteers were responsible for over 76,400 interactions with visitors. Nearly 59,000 of these interactions were with children, constituting approximately 15 per cent of the Museum’s engagement target for under 16s.

Having worked with the volunteers and seeing them in action around the galleries it is evident that their contribution is enormous.

Staff member

Learning volunteers have increased the Museum’s capacity to deliver face-to-face learning, which would not otherwise be feasible.

Staff member

Supporting corporate goals

The Museum’s Corporate Plan sets out seven visionary strands that inform and direct the organisation’s work. The Learning Volunteer Programme contributes directly to four of these priorities.

- **Delivering learning opportunities**
  Monitoring data and evaluation surveys demonstrate that Learning volunteers make a great contribution to the success of gallery-based learning activities.

- **Creating engaged and scientifically literate citizens**
  The research shows that volunteers and visitors alike have improved their understanding of natural history as a result of the programme.

- **Inspiring lifelong commitment to the natural world**
  The programme has enhanced visitor and volunteer passion for the natural world. It has also provided the motivation and means for volunteers to pursue a personalised path in lifelong learning.

- **Engaging a larger, more diverse audience**
  The Learning volunteer team contributes to organisational diversity and also engages with all sectors of the Museum’s audiences

The paid staff/volunteer interface

There is always potential for paid staff and volunteers to feel concern about their roles. Devising unique roles for Learning volunteers and establishing channels of communication with staff and trade unions has encouraged the programme to have a positive impact on Museum staff. During the evaluation, staff described how the passion and commitment they saw in the volunteers was often inspirational and encouraging. For many, it reminded them of why they had originally chosen to work at the Museum and why they were passionate about its work, visitors and natural history as a whole.

Sometimes it’s easy to forget what an amazing place you work at. When there are other people coming in as volunteers, it really emphasises that to you.

Staff member

I’ve met some fabulous people on the programme, feeding off their enthusiasm, seeing them in their role. It makes you feel good.

Staff member
The impact on the volunteers

One of the central aims of the Learning Volunteer Programme is to provide fulfilling lifelong learning experiences for the volunteers. As a result, volunteers have experienced a wide range of benefits.

Having fun

During the evaluation, volunteers said how much they enjoyed participating in the programme. They felt proud to be part of the Museum, a place that often had childhood attachment. Most of the volunteers stated that they had a love of natural history, and being able to pursue this at the Museum was considered a privilege. A great deal of gratification came from the interactions volunteers had with visitors. For many, inspiring a sense of interest, excitement and awe of the natural world, especially in children, was highly motivating.

I think it is when you see that look in a child’s face when something clicks. You have kind of unlocked something there – I mean, that’s just a marvellous feeling... opening up that world and getting them passionate and interested in the natural world. It may be something really simple, like a child using a magnifying glass for the first time. And maybe they don’t learn anything else in the situation, but they learn something they have never done before. It can be quite small things, but it can unlock huge things as well.

Nathalie, 29, volunteer

In my previous life I used to work quite a lot, but when you’re in front of the kids you respect them and all your mind is focused on your conversation with them. You forget about whatever might have bothered you on the business side and you feel good about that.

Paul, 41, volunteer

Learning and developing

Many Learning volunteers felt they have developed personally as a result of their volunteering, describing the positive impact of interacting, engaging and communicating with the public. Eighty per cent said their confidence had increased as a direct result.

Volunteers attributed a wide range of new skills to the comprehensive training and enrichment programmes alongside the experience gained in the galleries. Ninety-five per cent said their knowledge and understanding of natural history had increased. They also gained a variety of ‘soft’ skills: 74 per cent felt their ability to communicate with other people had improved, while 89 per cent felt their ability to help other people learn had increased. Volunteers also said their team work and leadership skills had improved.

Securing jobs and new skills

More than one quarter of volunteers said they started volunteering with the programme to help them get a paid job or a better job, an aspiration welcomed by the Museum. Learning volunteers are able to apply for jobs advertised by the Museum and are kept informed of vacancies. Since the start of the programme, 10 volunteers have been successful in applying for science educator roles within the Museum, their volunteering experience being a key factor in their selection.

The effectiveness of the programme in helping volunteers find employment outside the Museum is also notable. Programme records show that 12 Learning volunteers have gained external paid employment or have been accepted onto further education courses. Five of these individuals still volunteer in their spare time.

Nearly half of all respondents felt their volunteering experience had directly improved their chances of getting a paid or a better job. Volunteers frequently discussed how the skills and knowledge they had gained were useful in interviews. Other volunteers described longer-term career benefits, in which their volunteering helped them as part of a broader career change.
I have got myself a part time job and I think being here has helped give me the confidence to get off my backside and go and get a job. I think also that when I was asked what I was doing, I mentioned this and it was quite impressive. To do something you don’t get paid for, you’re putting in more effort than when you’re paid for something.

Nathalie, 29, volunteer

Making friends

In addition to formal Museum meetings and seminars, Learning volunteers are invited to Museum-wide and volunteer social events throughout the year, including Christmas parties and summer events. As well as a thank you, these events are an opportunity for volunteers to meet each other informally and to get to know other Museum staff. The research showed that these events are highly popular – 93 per cent felt volunteering increased their opportunity to meet new people. Ninety-three per cent said that participating in social events increased their sense of belonging to the organisation.

Understanding others

Just under half of volunteers said their understanding of diversity and other cultures had increased as a direct result of their volunteering. Some said they interacted with people from backgrounds they would not normally have encountered, something that increased their acceptance of others and helped to break down barriers.

The Learning volunteer team has contributed positively to embedding diversity in the organisational culture and has provided excellent role models for the broad range of Natural History Museum audiences.

Staff member

We meet a vast array of people from all walks of life. It is a great privilege to meet those people.

Oomar, 31, volunteer

Everyone is so different, different backgrounds, different nationalities, different interests – amazingly everyone is friends. Yeah, I like the people. Every week I look forward to seeing these people.

Kaoru, 29, volunteer
Bones and movement Focus Point
Key areas of success

The research endorsed that the Learning Volunteer Programme demonstrates good practice in supporting and managing volunteers. This has been central to developing a programme that is mutually beneficial to the Museum and the volunteers. Much of this good practice is transferable to other museums and organisations.

Commitment and understanding

The value of volunteering to the Museum was recognised by senior staff from the start of the programme. Its strategic development was enabled by staff ‘champions’. It was understood volunteering was a cost-effective, but not cost-free, activity. While volunteers give their time for free, investment is required to support them. So, appropriate support, in terms of finance and staff time, was allocated.

I think it is a huge, positive force for action in the Museum. It’s wonderful because it is positively affecting the visitors who come to the Museum. It is positively affecting the volunteers and our organisation as well.

Sharon Ament, Director of Public Engagement Group

The support we get from the Learning development staff is outstanding – they are very accommodating to our own schedule needs. As you can imagine, many of us are working professionals... and our time constraints can be quite limiting. They go out of their way to make sure things are convenient for us to be able to do.

Oomar, 31, volunteer

This is the most organised volunteering I’ve ever done.

Participant in volunteer focus group

The achievements of the Learning Volunteer Programme are promoted throughout the Museum through newsletters, updates and presentations. Several of the Museum’s directors have also raised awareness of the programme by volunteering during Volunteers Week. These strategies have helped encourage buy-in from staff at all levels and increased the understanding of the value of volunteering. Most staff who took part in the evaluation said they did not look on volunteer time as a free resource. They also appreciated that volunteers make a unique and valuable contribution to the Museum far above a simple financial saving.

Comprehensive volunteer support

Much of the good practice reflected by the programme relates specifically to the support volunteers receive. All the volunteers involved in the evaluation were positive about the support they received, particularly from programme managers.
Key areas of success

Four areas of volunteer support are particularly important to consider:

- **Policies and practices**
The writing of a comprehensive, Museum-wide volunteer policy underpinned the foundation of the Learning Volunteer Programme. This ensured the programme developed in a standardised and cohesive way. Current good practice was applied throughout, in consultation with Volunteering England and the Museum’s Human Resources Department, legal team and trade unions. The policy was launched three months before the start of the programme and clearly set out all the procedures relating to volunteers. Two key components of the policy are:

  1. The volunteer arrangement, which outlines Museum expectations and what volunteers can expect from the Museum.
  2. The Volunteer Problem Solving Procedure, which guides the resolution of any issues arising.

- **Expenses**
Learning volunteers are reimbursed for travel and lunch on the days they volunteer. This addresses a key barrier to volunteering. Volunteers said it had been an important factor in allowing them to continue volunteering during periods of financial difficulty. Research suggests this policy is not always in place in other museums. One study showed that less than half of museums offer out-of-pocket expenses to their volunteers.

- **Recruitment**
Volunteers reported an overwhelmingly positive view of the programme’s recruitment process. In particular, they liked the quick response from the programme manager after their initial enquiry. Volunteers commented on the thorough interview and application process. They felt it successfully tested their commitment to volunteering and to the Museum, balancing professionalism and friendliness. Volunteers who felt nervous before the interview were quickly put at ease.

  The recruitment process ensures the Museum is able to develop a good understanding of the motivations and possible commitment of prospective volunteers. It also allows the candidates to find out about the role and explore whether it is right for them.

  The whole process was straightforward and no problem. From initial contact to interview and then onto the volunteer programme, [it] was made very easy and accessible.

  Volunteer survey

  I found the whole process pleasurable. I felt kept in the loop and informed of all developments with my application. The paperwork was straightforward and the interview challenging, but it was also a great introduction and overview of the role.

  Volunteer survey

**Induction and training**

Programme managers recognise that induction and training are vital elements in the support of the Learning volunteers. The programme places great emphasis on equipping volunteers with the skills and knowledge relevant to the activities they will be involved in.

At the start of their volunteering, 21 per cent of Learning volunteers were concerned they would not have sufficient technical knowledge to be successful in their role. They were reassured during training and induction, as well as during the interview, to hear that enthusiasm and communication skills were more important to the role than specialised knowledge. Volunteers described the importance of receiving ongoing support and mentoring from programme managers and fellow volunteers during the early stages.

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Supervision

A key aspect of the Learning Volunteer Programme is the supervision and close support the volunteers receive from programme managers. They provide the volunteers with morning briefing sessions, end of day de-briefs and ongoing informal support during the day. Volunteers are able to contact the programme managers by email or phone when they are away from the Museum.

Volunteers and staff attributed much of the success of the programme to the commitment and work of the programme managers. They said the support was professional, comprehensive and above all friendly.

All but one of the volunteers who responded to the survey said they were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the briefing sessions provided by programme managers.

Relations between paid staff and volunteers

A critical element of the Learning Volunteer Programme has been ensuring volunteers add value to the services provided by the Museum, without replacing paid staff positions. The Museum and the Learning Department have worked hard to ensure this is understood and put into practice as the programme has developed.

During programme development, programme managers spent time consulting with the trade unions and their representatives, making it clear that Learning volunteers would not replace staff. The roles and responsibilities of the Learning volunteers within the Museum were clarified and widely publicised. This was confirmed in the Volunteer Policy.

As a result, paid Museum staff and Learning volunteers have good relations. However, discussions with staff reinforce the need for continued attention to the demarcation of staff and volunteer roles and continuing dialogue about new developments. The great majority of staff felt the current level of delineation between staff and volunteers was sufficient. Volunteers were particularly happy with the relationship, with 92 per cent saying it was ‘excellent’ or ‘good’. The majority of staff felt the relationship was ‘very good’, ‘good’ or ‘OK’. Staff also demonstrated a high level of awareness of the Learning volunteers’ contribution to the Museum.

The Learning Department has created a number of opportunities where volunteers and staff can interact. Events such as the Christmas and summer parties and visits to Lyme Regis for the Museum’s Fossil Festival were popular with both volunteers and staff. This helped develop a better understanding of one another’s roles, to get to know each other on a personal level and to develop a greater appreciation of the role of volunteering within the Museum. Reflecting on the popularity of these events, there was a strong demand by staff and volunteers for further social opportunities.

Volunteers complement the work of employees. They are not a substitute for employees and the Museum does not recruit volunteers to displace them nor should volunteers undermine the terms and conditions of paid staff. The relations between paid staff and volunteers will be enhanced by good procedures, clarity of respective roles, mutual trust and support.

Natural History Museum
Volunteer Policy, February 2005
Conclusion

The Learning Volunteer Programme is an ongoing and evolving programme. It is nonetheless possible to conclude that it has fulfilled, and in many cases exceeded, its original aims and objectives.

The evaluation demonstrated that:

• The Museum benefits from the activities of the Learning volunteers, which enhance the provision of enquiry-based learning for Museum visitors and support corporate priorities, while the Museum provides enriching lifelong learning opportunities for the volunteers. The Museum, its visitors, its staff and the volunteers have benefited considerably in a variety of ways. There is widespread understanding throughout the Museum that volunteering within the programme is a mutually beneficial activity.

• The Learning Department has developed an inclusive volunteering programme. The volunteers demonstrate a wide variety of backgrounds and age range. The volunteers are also trained to engage with all Museum audiences.

• The programme demonstrates good practice in volunteer management and support, and provides a high-quality volunteer experience.

• The programme has a high profile throughout the Museum. Staff at all levels appear to appreciate the unique contribution volunteers make.

• The programme has attracted many visits and contacts from external organisations wanting to learn from its achievements. Examples include European Volunteer Centre, Brussels, Liverpool Museums Service, Kew Gardens, British Museum, Community Service Volunteers, Volunteering England and Guide Dogs for the Blind Association. The programme has also hosted an intern from the National History Museum of Copenhagen.

Guidance for other museums

The following guidelines are offered to other cultural organisations interested in engaging volunteers.

Organisational commitment and understanding

• ensure high-level, strategic buy-in
• work towards a champion who can drive forward, promote and publicise volunteering at the strategic level
• ensure suitable levels of funding and resources are invested
• ensure volunteering is recognised as a cost-effective, but not cost-free, activity
• ensure the unique attributes of volunteering and the value it adds is promoted by all staff
• put in place policies and practices, including a broad volunteer policy, addressing what volunteers can expect and what the museum expects from their involvement
Volunteer support

- ensure interviews balance professionalism with a suitable level of friendliness and informality, recognising that the prospective volunteer may be nervous and may have limited experience of interviews
- make sure interviews are thorough enough to allow a full exploration of the motivations and possible commitment of the prospective volunteer
- carry out Criminal Record Bureau checks if volunteers will be working with children and vulnerable adults and offer support and assistance to volunteers during this process when needed
- ensure sufficient training is provided to prepare volunteers in their role
- in public interpretation roles, adequately communicate the learning process and how volunteers should engage and interact with visitors
- introduce new volunteers to staff and other volunteers
- ensure line managers and volunteer supervisors are available to volunteers when needed
- make sure any personal issues are dealt with professionally, sensitively and confidentially, and that there are procedures in place for resolving problems
- build in opportunities for volunteers to receive feedback on their volunteering, and to offer feedback themselves
- provide non-obligatory opportunities for volunteers to get together socially

Relations between staff and volunteers

- develop volunteer roles that add value and ensure there is sufficient delineation between staff and volunteer roles
- involve paid staff in discussions when developing volunteer programmes that work alongside or closely with paid staff members
- continue to update paid staff with developments and changes to volunteer programmes
- include a statement in the volunteer policy about the relationship between paid staff and volunteers and the value volunteers add
- create informal opportunities for interactions between staff and volunteers

Lunch in the staff canteen
Learning activator in Ice Station Antarctica
New directions

Building on the strengths highlighted in the evaluation, the Learning Volunteer Programme will move forward with more recruitment. A key driving force for expansion of the team is the opening of the second phase of the Darwin Centre at the Museum in 2009, which will bring exciting opportunities and new roles for volunteers.

With the prospect of a growing team, another important reason to diversify volunteer roles is to embed sustainability in the programme. In addition to their new Darwin Centre roles, Learning volunteers will have the opportunity to gain administrative, supervisory and mentoring skills by assisting programme managers with the operational running of the programme.

Community volunteering is a new initiative planned for February 2008, when Learning volunteers will take their activities out to community groups. This project will actively promote pathways to volunteering at the Museum, with the aim of increasing the cultural diversity of the volunteer team.

What really impressed me was the unique way the programme engages people. Visitors are much more engaged when they can actually handle specimens and talk to knowledgeable and enthusiastic volunteers. The volunteers themselves have engaged with the Museum and the collections in a way that gives them ownership. It is a real pleasure to watch volunteers and visitors explore the collections together.

Caroline Mark, volunteer co-ordinator, the Science Museum
References and resources


National Centre for Volunteering (2002) Getting it Right from the Start, Volunteer Policies – the Key to Diverse Volunteer Involvement, National Centre for Volunteering: London


Volunteering England Good Practice Bank www.volunteering.org.uk/Resources/goodpracticebank/
Our volunteers
Photography by Kevin Webb
Design by the Natural History Museum Design Studio

The Natural History Museum
Cromwell Road  London  SW7 5BD
www.nhm.ac.uk

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This publication is dedicated to the fond memory of Nick Andrews, one of the first Learning volunteers. His dedication, enthusiasm and geniality helped establish the Learning Volunteer Programme.