

Engaging with our Volunteers during Covid-19

A Case Study from Birmingham Museums Trust



Background

Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT) is an educational charity that cares for nine unique museums and historic properties across the city of Birmingham.

Each year we work with a team of volunteers across all nine sites who support us with welcoming visitors, assisting with events and activities, working with our collections, supporting conservation work, advising us, helping our work with our communities, working with our curators, gardening and supporting with other projects too. In 2019/2020 1,119 volunteers gave us 24,221 hours of their time, this included volunteers who supported us one day a year through to those who volunteered on a regular weekly basis.

On 16 March due to the developing Covid-19 situation we suspended all onsite volunteering at BMT, and over 300 regular volunteers were left in the position that their usual volunteering was no longer possible.

Key Objectives

- Maintain communication with, and offer support to, our volunteer team
- Support our team to continue to volunteer with us during this time from home, if they wanted to

How we did it

Almost immediately following the suspension of our onsite volunteering we noticed that many of our volunteers were missing the routine their volunteering gave them. To reinstate a little routine we started a weekly email on Mondays called the 'Monday Morning Mail' to be sent out to all current volunteers with BMT.

This was quick to set up and we were able to send our first email out on 23 March. Responses from our volunteers were immediately positive –

- *“Just a quick thank you for keeping in touch. It will be important to all volunteers to have this contact to know we still matter.”*
- *“What a good idea for keeping in touch and the links are useful whilst stuck in isolation.”*
- *“Thank you for the email - it's lovely of you to keep in touch in these difficult times.”*

The Monday Morning Mail features a range of updates from across BMT but also links to external websites and activities to support volunteers during the lockdown period. These links are also posted in our closed BMT Volunteers Facebook Group, which some of our team access.

As it became clear that we were not going to be resuming onsite volunteering any time soon we trialled our first ever Virtual Volunteer Coffee Morning. We held this event on 14 April and over 20 volunteers joined in. There were some technical difficulties in terms of accessing video and sound but again the responses were incredibly positive and volunteers enjoyed seeing each other and meeting new volunteers too. We have since held short tutorials with some volunteers who were struggling to use Zoom for this event and we have made our Virtual Volunteer Coffee Morning a fortnightly activity on a Tuesday morning.

At the start of May we were able to set up online opportunities for our volunteers to support us from home. These took time to organise and our Volunteer Manager worked with two staff in our Collections Team to make these possible. The projects we have set up are –

- An Asbestos Checklist Team to identify asbestos in the collections remotely
- An Accession Register Team to transcribe information from our original accession registers into a format that can be uploaded onto our Collections Management System
- An Artist Research Team to research artist biographies to support the digitisation of our Works on Paper Project

So far 49 volunteers have supported us with these projects, with a few volunteers taking part in more than one project. We started each project with an introductory Zoom session for all involved, gave them some reading and/or training to undertake and then for each project volunteers are paired up with another volunteer to check each other's work and support each other too. Check in sessions throughout the projects are held over Zoom.

Our Monday Morning Mail, Virtual Volunteer Coffee Mornings and Online Volunteering are three key areas that we have worked on over the last three months to continue to engage our volunteers

at BMT. These have been supported by additional activities such as one to one phone calls, individual emails to volunteers and volunteers writing blogs and social media posts too.

What's happened as a result

Volunteers are a very important part of BMT and it has been crucially important to engage with them during this time. Online communication through the Monday Morning Mail and Virtual Volunteer Coffee Mornings have enabled us to continue to work with this team, share updates, show them their importance and also to find out how they are and their feelings towards returning to onsite volunteering.

Our online volunteering projects are providing a great opportunity to engage volunteers remotely to do valuable work for us during lockdown. They are contributing to the research, interpretation and development of our collection and assisting in both the effective management of the collection and access during lockdown and moving forwards.

Whilst this volunteering is beneficial to BMT it is also supporting the wellbeing and development of our volunteers. The projects provide an opportunity for members of our team to gain valuable skills, to work hands on with our documentation and to engage with each other during this unprecedented time. Their responses to the project included:

- *"I will learn something new, which I suppose is one of the upsides of lockdown."*
- *"This will be really helpful and interesting to me to be able to help with."*
- *"It will be brilliant to work with other people on this."*

Key Points

- Maintaining communication with our volunteer team has been critically important for us at BMT during this time and has been valued and well received by our team
- Volunteers have been able to support our work from home, enabling us to engage volunteers and to achieve more as an organisation too

Conclusions/Recommendations

This project has been very important to us at BMT as we want our volunteers to know they are valued, even during these strange times. It has been effective because we have communicated honestly with our volunteers throughout the months and have provided ways for them to continue their support if they would like to.

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