

Wakefield Museums: Volunteering development

What was the issue?

Wakefield is a local authority run service with museums in Wakefield, Pontefract and Castleford. They have been undergoing a period of huge change with museums relocating and redeveloping.

During this time their work with volunteers was put on hold. Whilst they understood the value that volunteers could bring, they lacked the staff expertise and procedures to fully support and integrate them within the workforce.

The museum team were acutely aware of the responsibilities and legal obligations of using volunteers and were keen to adopt new, integrated ways of working that would benefit the service, its paid staff and volunteers. In particular they knew that they didn't have the capacity to manage regular volunteers and they felt that the most effective way to use additional people was on short, clearly defined projects.

How did Museum Development Yorkshire help?

In 2013, they applied for Museums Development Yorkshire support to develop a new volunteering programme. At the time there were several museums that requested similar support and Museums Development Yorkshire engaged Liz Hamilton from York Centre for Voluntary Service to work with the group.

What happened?

They started with a group training day. The team found it really interesting and useful to work alongside other museums with very different levels of experience and expertise of working with volunteers. They felt that as complete novices they learned much from the other museum services.

The workshop explored all elements of running a volunteering programme, including their particular concern about ‘keeping it legal’. They also shared practical and adaptable policies and handbooks from other organisations, particularly from York Museums Trust.

After the initial training session, they were given one-to-one support. An action plan was drawn up, with realistic deadlines and all the steps required to create their new volunteering programme.

The team feel that they now have a framework which allows them to work confidently with volunteers and which will increase the knowledge and expertise of the team. It will enable them to deliver a richer and more varied offer, involving museum visitors in all aspects of their work, including exhibitions, collections research and education. Working with volunteers will also give management opportunities for staff which will increase their skills.

The new volunteering opportunities will make the museum more visible in the community, linking strongly with local people, giving them ‘ownership’ and inviting them to act as ambassadors. Since launching the programme, volunteers have taken on a wide range of roles, from helping with learning provision, to cleaning archaeological finds and working on documentation in the museum store.

Find out more

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