

Volunteering at The National Archives

The National Archives' approach to user participation



Right: image from CO 1069 photographic collection, released as Africa Through A Lens

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1. Introduction

'[Volunteering is] any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups)...volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual. This can include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation.'

Volunteering England

'Even in tough financial circumstances, our focus will continue to be on sustaining and preserving the record, and making it more accessible to the public and volunteers than it ever has been before.'

Oliver Morley, Chief Executive and Keeper, The National Archives

The National Archives has seen many changes in its history, but the primary function has always remained constant: to be the central repository for public records of England, Wales and the United Kingdom, and to provide access to the collection. This is articulated clearly in our four-year strategic plan for 2011-15 entitled *For the Record. For Good*, which sets out our mission of being 'here for the government record, to ensure its past, and future, its use and re-use, keeping it authentic, available and accessible to all'.

In recent years, The National Archives' focus has broadened to accommodate both the changing nature of the public record, which has expanded beyond paper and parchment to include multiple digital formats, and the growing expectations of its users, who expect to be able to conduct all of their business instantly and online. Increasingly, our records are either digitised or born-digital and for several years now, The National Archives has had a strategy of providing and enabling our online content and reach. In 2010-11 we delivered over 120 million records to over 20 million online users, and for every document delivered in our reading rooms at Kew, 200 were delivered online.

This evolving digital model presents an exciting opportunity for volunteers to collaborate with us in a virtual world, while also providing us with the challenges presented by digital exclusion. Our commitment to provide an increasing number of our services in a digital format reflects the government's own commitment to make digital delivery the default for public service provision. We need to ensure that we provide opportunities for those who have little or no experience of using digital resources, as well as those who do.

As outlined in this strategy, the volunteers who work on site at Kew are an integral part of our success story as an organisation. Over the last 20 years they have made an invaluable contribution to our work, helping to catalogue and conserve thousands of records, in the process helping to ensure that these records remain accessible to future researchers. However, the changing nature of our work means that we need to examine how we work with all of our volunteers, and what we offer them.

This strategy seeks to advance our understanding of the possibilities and potential benefits of working with volunteers in new and exciting ways, while adopting a more holistic and coordinated approach to existing activities which are driven by and closely aligned to business priorities.

The wider notion of participation, combining traditional volunteering activities with virtual collaboration, reflects how we intend to work with volunteers in the future. We will build new communities within our current stakeholder groups, while also reaching out to collaborate with a variety of audiences. We will extend our services and develop new approaches for providing access to our services and information. We will reach into new horizons by using collaborative digital channels, increasing the opportunities for users to interact with us.

We will build new partnerships so we can share our audiences and experiences with other organisations that can, in turn, do the same for us. This includes working with networks of people or using third-party technology solutions to enable us to meet our core objectives, giving best value to all parties.

Finally, we will share our best practice guidance with the archive sector and beyond, including case studies and management approaches to enable others to learn from our experiences, whether positive or less successful. By leading in this area The National Archives can ensure a cohesive approach across the archive sector, showing archives how they can use communities and partnerships to shape, enrich and help deliver public services.

2. Challenges and opportunities

The government volunteer agenda

The Prime Minister's Big Society ambitions, articulated in Liverpool in July 2010¹, are now being echoed across Europe, where there is an increasing awareness of the importance and value of volunteering. The European Union designated 2011 the European Year of Volunteering, with the following objectives²:

- To create an enabling and facilitating environment for volunteering in the EU.
- To empower volunteer organisations and improve the quality of volunteering.
- To reward and recognise volunteering activities.
- To raise awareness of the value and importance of volunteering.

The government's ambitious Race Online initiative³ also presents new challenges for us. The underlying aim is to ensure that more public services are made available online and are inclusive, as outlined by the Prime Minister: 'In the internet age, we need to ensure that people aren't being left behind as more and more services and business move online. But this issue isn't just about fairness...promoting digital inclusion is essential for a dynamic modern economy and can help to make government more efficient and effective.'

Leading the nation's archives

With the responsibility for leading the UK's archive sector transferring to The National Archives, it is particularly important that we have a clear and holistic approach to working with volunteers that can form part of our leadership offering and advocacy role for the archive sector.

The findings of a sector-wide *Volunteering in Archives* report⁴, commissioned by the National Council on Archives (NCA), demonstrated how people identify and value the skills they acquire through their voluntary work with archive services. Nearly a third of respondents said that they had benefited from improving their IT and other work-related skills, while other major benefits include gaining a better sense of being part of a community, improving confidence when job hunting, increasing social life and gaining new friends. Volunteering also supports individuals returning to work after periods of unemployment by providing training in new skills and exposure to new sectors. The Archives and Records Association also stated in July 2011 that 'volunteers provide much needed "added value" support for archives by helping, for example, to enhance access and improve the preservation of collections'⁵.

The report also identifies issues relating to the recruitment of volunteers and highlights the need to attract an increasingly diverse range of volunteers into the archive sector. While there are a number of examples of people using volunteering as a way of helping them to enter the archive profession, the report emphasises the need for archive services to broaden the appeal of volunteering in the sector to non-users. It provides an extremely useful base on which to develop the volunteering activities currently in place at The National Archives.

¹ <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/big-society-speech/>

² <http://europa.eu/volunteering/en>

³ <http://raceonline2012.org/about-us>

⁴ <http://nca.org.uk/materials/volunteeringinarchivesfinal.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.archives.org.uk/campaigns/volunteering.html>

3. Background

A long history of volunteering

The National Archives has worked with volunteers for many years on a number of activities, from traditional volunteering activities (such as cataloguing and conservation) to a combination of on site volunteering, remote cataloguing and online collaboration projects.

We have had many successes with volunteer projects, although our approach to volunteer projects has always been somewhat disjointed, which may have limited our success. Up until now almost all volunteer initiatives have been driven by individual departments, in some cases individual members of staff, and as an organisation we have never strategically explored this valuable resource. Supervising staff or departments, left without clear guidance on our strategic approach to volunteers and volunteer management issues, have devised a number of volunteering models. These encompass a wide and inconsistent range of engagement, recruitment, communication, monitoring, expenses and exit strategies.

The following examples are representatives of the different ways in which we have enlisted the help of volunteers; this is not an exhaustive list.

On site and remote volunteering

The Friends of The National Archives

The Friends of The National Archives⁶ (FTNA) are a registered charity and were established in 1988. Friends pay a membership fee, entitling them to a variety of benefits. Of the 570 Friends, approximately 85 are FTNA volunteers (with varying levels of activity). FTNA volunteers⁷ have traditionally worked on cataloguing projects with our records specialists.

In 2011, FTNA volunteers completed a lengthy cataloguing project of the record series WO 97, WO 119 and WO 121, resulting in the addition of more than 20,000 soldiers' records to the Catalogue. In 2011 FTNA volunteers embarked on an indexing project of the records of the Royal Artillery (WO 69).

Conservation volunteers

We have worked with volunteers from the National Association of Decorative & Fine Arts Societies (NADFAS) since 1997. NADFAS is an arts-based charity, with over 340 local decorative and fine art societies in the UK and mainland Europe⁸. NADFAS works in partnership with organisations to 'conserve our heritage both in Britain and in parts of Europe', recognising that 'conservation and preservation of our heritage are tremendous burdens on the limited resources of museums, National Trust properties, historic houses, libraries and gardens'.

On average, 40 NADFAS volunteers from six different local societies work on Collection Care's conservation programme, contributing around 2,500 volunteer hours per year. Volunteers and projects are managed, administrated and supervised by a team of conservation technicians, which collectively amounts to around a quarter of a full-time post. Volunteer projects generally consist of basic conservation activities such as ordering, numbering, dry surface cleaning, encapsulating and re-housing⁹.

⁶ <http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/get-involved/friends.htm>

⁷ <http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/friends/volunteering-friends.htm>

⁸ <http://nadfascjhadmin.net/default.asp?section=171>

⁹ Major conservation projects undertaken by NADFAS volunteers since 2005 have included work on over 650 boxes in ADM 157, 200 boxes in COPY 1, 90 volumes in BT 52, over 270 volumes in HCA 13, over 900 boxes in FCO, and 50 volumes of then-unaccessioned material from the Hydrographic Office, enabling other departments to carry out cataloguing work.

Other on site and remote cataloguing projects

A recent audit showed that we regularly work with over 200 cataloguing volunteers, evenly balanced between on site and remote (off site) volunteers. Cataloguing volunteers generally work under the direction of a records specialist, either in person at Kew or remotely. Examples of cataloguing projects delivered by both types of volunteer include poor law records (MH 12) and Royal Marine service records (ADM 157).

The poor law records project was a large-scale cataloguing and outreach activity which saw The National Archives working with volunteers from local and county archives, local studies librarians and museums, and local and family history societies to research and list a selection of the letters, memos and reports from poor law union correspondence records. In total, 200 project volunteers across the country catalogued 108 pieces and added 4.6 million words to our catalogue. Volunteers were recruited specifically for this purpose and their involvement ceased at the end of the project; they are therefore omitted from the aforementioned volunteer audit.

The Royal Marine service records project (ADM 157) is an on site cataloguing project, with the objective of improving our catalogue descriptions. The project is still ongoing, but has already been presented with an award from the Royal Marine Historical Society.

Other on site volunteers

We are also fortunate to have a number of volunteers around the organisation who help out with other activities, many of whom are sourced from community volunteer programmes.

Online volunteering

Your Archives

The ground-breaking Your Archives¹⁰ wiki was launched in April 2007 as a community for record users to share their knowledge of British history and our collection, as well as other archival sources. Your Archives was built using MediaWiki, the same technology pioneered by Wikipedia. Contributors wrote almost 21,000 articles, which were collectively viewed over 48 million times, showing the huge appetite for this type of platform. However, the rate of active participation was very low – on average, only 0.5% of users actually edit or contribute to the wiki.

The aim of Your Archives was to develop a knowledge-sharing community, rather than simply creating another learning resource. A review of the wiki concluded that it was not meeting its original objectives, and that we should explore other ways to engage record users. Development of Your Archives was therefore suspended in order to pursue the integration of user collaboration functionality into Discovery, our catalogue.

Africa Through A Lens

Africa Through A Lens¹¹ is a user collaboration project delivered in 2011, which saw thousands of digitised images from one of our photographic collections (record series CO 1069) published online. Starting with some incredible early photographs from the 1860s, the images span over 100 years of African history.

We published the images on the photo-sharing website Flickr and invited users to help us improve catalogue descriptions and geographical references through the standard Flickr interface. The ultimate intention is to extract these user contributions from Flickr in order to add them to our catalogue.

¹⁰ <http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

¹¹ <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/africa>

4. Our response

In summary, we want to understand, appreciate and engage with participants in shaping, enriching and delivering our public services, ensuring that all participation activities are aligned with strategic priorities and have clear business benefits. In doing this we aim to build and strengthen our relationships with communities and partnerships, developing best practice approaches that can be shared with the archive sector.

Above all we aim to ensure that this strategy is driven as much by the needs of participants as it is by the organisation itself. Wherever opportunities originate, whether from participants or from within The National Archives, it is important for both participants and the organisation that only those activities which have clear business benefits are pursued. This will ensure that our own resources and the valuable time of participants is utilised effectively in order to develop our strategic priorities.

Overall objectives

Analysis:

- We will develop an understanding and appreciation of what motivates people to volunteer generally, as well as specifically at The National Archives.
- We will identify and evaluate exemplars of good/best practice, and incorporate such practice when developing the strategy.
- We will learn from the past by assessing previous participation activities, seeking to replicate the positive and eliminate any negative experiences in the future.

Opportunity:

- We will objectively assess participation opportunities against predetermined and weighted business needs/benefits.
- We will develop a portfolio of volunteering opportunities for individuals and/or groups to consider/explore.

Engagement:

- We will engage with individuals, groups, communities and partners to develop and implement the strategy.
- We will build and nurture new and effective online collaboration communities.
- We will develop partnerships with other bodies in the public, private and/or third sectors.
- We will work in partnership with community groups to understand barriers to engagement and identify opportunities for collaborative working.

Delivery:

- We will identify a set of deliverables for 2011-12 with clear measurable benefits and success criteria, and will develop a high-level package of activity for the remainder of the four-year strategic plan.
- We will explore new technologies and platforms to deliver user participation projects.
- We will work with individuals, communities and partners to shape, enrich and help deliver our user participation projects.
- We will establish an effective governance structure to manage associated risks, provide assurance and monitor performance as appropriate.

- We will develop best practice approaches, which can be used by the wider sector to build cost-effective new services.
- We will look after our volunteers and ensure that we nurture and develop them.

Strategic approach

We have already established a governance structure to develop the strategy and oversee its ongoing delivery and implementation.

A **user participation steering group** formed from different business areas across The National Archives¹² has developed this user participation strategy. The steering group actively seeks specialist advice and guidance from outside The National Archives as appropriate, including The National Archives' User Advisory Group¹³, which was established to provide an opportunity for our users to get involved in planning and decision-making processes.

We have audited previous and current volunteer projects, and have also surveyed existing participants to really understand what motivates them to volunteer for The National Archives.

The steering group has developed a set of criteria, in the form of an **evaluation matrix**, to assess all proposed user participation projects. These criteria ensure that only projects which are aligned to our overall objectives and this strategy¹⁴, and therefore are in line with The National Archives' strategic objectives, are approved and proceed.

A **user participation programme board** has also been convened to provide governance over approved user participation projects. Like the steering group, membership of this board will be taken from across the organisation. The board will ensure that user participation projects are delivered on schedule and budget, will manage risks and will report to The National Archives' executive team and management board. The programme board will also provide updates to the User Advisory Group.

The programme board will be proactive in helping colleagues to understand the user participation strategy and will provide a collaborative forum. The programme board will meet as often as needed to consider new project proposals, to monitor existing projects, to discuss changes and developments in the external environment and to review the direction of the strategy.

The group is also producing a number of policies and tools that can be used across The National Archives to help develop future projects and ensure that volunteers are recruited, engaged and managed consistently.

We will engage with our users, primarily but not exclusively through the User Advisory Group, to encourage and identify future potential participation opportunities, to seek feedback on proposals and to strengthen partnership arrangements with the stakeholder sectors.

We will actively seek to engage with and explain this **user participation strategy** to all stakeholders, including staff, users, participants, partners and the wider archive sector. We will communicate the aims and ambitions of the user participation strategy to staff, at departmental meetings and through internal communications channels, to ensure that staff are clear about the strategy and the role of the user participation programme board.

We will communicate the strategy to the wider archive sector, explaining our strategic approach to participation, while aiming to translate our approach into best practices and tools that can be adapted and shared with the sector.

¹² The steering group and programme board are both chaired by the Director of Operations and Services, and include representatives from Archives Sector Development, Advice and Records Knowledge, Collection Care, Systems Development, Education and Outreach, Research, Human Resources, Finance and Marketing and Communications.

¹³ <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/get-involved/user-advisory-group.htm>

¹⁴ We have completed an internal equality impact assessment for this strategic approach. The assessment is a tool that helps us look at the effects of our policies, practices, procedures and functions on different groups of people, and ensures that they do not discriminate against anyone or treat them unfairly.

Finally we will aim to professionalise how we work with volunteers. This will include the development of a **portfolio of user participation projects** to engage volunteers, covering a broad spectrum of interests and methods to recruit new volunteers and retain existing ones.

As of February 2012 a number of projects approved by the programme board were already under way, including the following:

- **Gold Coast:** A cataloguing project focusing on records from the Gold Coast (Ghana) during the Ashanti war of 1899-1902 (CO 96 series). This project aims to highlight and to begin to open up an under-used area of The National Archives' collection of diverse histories using a re-usable model for improving access to diverse collections using on site volunteer resources. The project aims to diversify our volunteer community by attracting new volunteers with an interest in, or connection with, African history.
- **Caribbean Through A Lens:** Building on the success of the Africa Through A Lens project, and the Your Caribbean Heritage cataloguing project, the project seeks to build relationships with under-represented communities regionally and engage with non-traditional audiences. It will help better understand under-represented communities' motivations for, and barriers to, involvement in voluntary projects, with the result that we will be able to more effectively widen our volunteer base in the future.
- **Rest of the World Through A Lens:** Following a similar model to Africa Through A Lens, this project will see the rest of the CO 1069 series published on Flickr in phased releases. This will provide online access to a collection of photographs previously only available at Kew and will provide a space for people to engage with the records, with each other, and with The National Archives. The first phase (Americas and island territories) is planned to happen in May 2012, with further phases (Asia, Oceania & Pacific and Middle East & Mediterranean) planned to the end of March 2013.
- **User collaboration development of Discovery:** The introduction of a tagging tool to Discovery, our new catalogue, will aim to increase the 'findability' of records, open up under-described records and help to modernise catalogue language by allowing our users to tag catalogue content. We anticipate that this will lay the foundations for future developments, such as adding user-generated content to catalogue descriptions.
- **Conservation:** Following a review of our relationship with conservation volunteers, we will develop a schedule of basic conservation or preservation activities that are suitable for volunteers to assist us with. We will also create a formal volunteering programme for students related to conservation or preservation activities for which some experience is required.
- **First World War unit war diaries:** These records provide a fascinating insight for our users into the daily activity and movements of troops on the western front and are already among our most popular records produced on site – we expect their popularity to increase with the centenary approaching in 2014, and so have decided to digitise them and publish them online, taking the opportunity to carry out essential conservation work in the process. When we started the project we discovered that the pages within each piece were out of order – their popularity means that they have become slightly disorganised over almost 100 years of reference. We packaged the necessary sorting exercise as a volunteer project, with prospective volunteers requiring no cataloguing or records experience, simply a degree of patience and an eye for detail. We've recruited around 30 brand new volunteers to date, who are a mix of existing users and people who merely wanted to volunteer their time for us – a prospect that we had not previously considered! We have also enlisted the help of volunteers from the London Family History Centre, who are currently based in our reading rooms.

A number of existing and **newly proposed projects** are also under review and being considered by the project board (February 2012). Although most of them are on site cataloguing projects, their scope and coverage is broad, covering subjects as diverse as medieval charters and records relating to the Jacobite rebellion to petitions made on behalf of criminals and Home Office domestic letters from the late 18th century. We will continue to actively identify new volunteering opportunities where we can.

In addition to this portfolio, we will publish a **volunteer toolkit** on our external website (including a volunteer policy and handbook), while internally we will provide **guidance for volunteer supervisors** and a standard letter of agreement to use when recruiting volunteers. We are looking at how we best **manage volunteers** across the organisation (using our CRM system), and develop a process for identifying matching volunteer skill sets and experience to new volunteer opportunities. This means that we will need to stay in touch with volunteers after each project has finished, so we will also look to start a **new volunteer newsletter**, aimed at providing project updates as well as promoting new volunteer opportunities.

We will also work on expanding the guidance for supervisors to include **online user participation projects**, to ensure that we treat online volunteers in a similar manner to those who volunteer at Kew (or an appropriate equivalent). Further to this, we will explore alternative models for online user participation projects, including remote cataloguing, indexing and transcription platforms.

We hope that the strategy will continue to evolve, and that we will not only add to the expanding portfolio but that we will be able to broaden the scope of how we can use volunteers as an organisation. For example, we will work with the **legislation expert participation project**, collaborating to ensure that we share knowledge and learning of working with a broader variety of participants and volunteers, whether they are legislation specialists or helpers with a cataloguing project.

In summary, to ensure that our organisational approach to volunteers continues to be inclusive and wide-reaching, we hope that this strategy will continue to evolve as we identify new opportunities and work with new audiences to achieve our fundamental objective of ensuring the accessibility of our records.