

National Museums Scotland

The organisation

National Museums Scotland is one of the UK's leading museums services with approximately 450 staff over 5 museum sites. These are: the National Museum of Scotland, the National War Museum, the National Museum of Flight and the National Museum of Rural Life. We also have our National Museums Collections Centre in the north of the city.

The main functions are:

- To add to and care for the collections.
- To ensure the accessibility of the collections to the public.
- To ensure that research on the collections is undertaken and that this knowledge is shared.
- In summary, responsible for the procurement, preservation and promotion of Scotland's cultural heritage.

“Involving volunteers adds value to what we do as they are an important part of the social fabric. We are both an NDPB (Non-departmental Public Body) and a charity so volunteering is an important strand that enables us to do more as they offer many levels of support.”

Types of volunteering

There are 5 main areas of volunteering with National Museums Scotland.

- Volunteers
 - 200 ongoing volunteers –
 - Volunteer guides, curatorial volunteers, learning and programmes volunteers, events volunteers, gardeners, library volunteers, conservation volunteers (eg. sewing bags to store shoes in) and rangers. “We support volunteer activity across a range of diverse activities on an ongoing basis.”
 - “The volunteer profile is diverse, however the ongoing volunteers tend to be retired volunteers as much of the activities take place during the working day 9-5.”
 - All volunteers must satisfactorily complete full Disclosure Scotland checks, are provided with an ID badges.
 - 300 – 500 events volunteers
 - The profile for this group of volunteers differs in that they are mainly students or people who already work. A lot of the work tends to be front-line activity supporting events with volunteers supervised at all times.



- Unpaid work placements – through universities and normally 3 – 6 months related to museums studies or conservation courses.
- Research Associates – professionals who may have retired and/or are specialists in their field of study and wish to continue their research. Such applications are approved in the first instance by the Director and Museum Executive Team.
- Work experience – 15-18 year olds on 1 week work experience.
- Interns (unpaid) – these are for graduates who want to gain professional development.



Innovative opportunities

“We have recruited ex-aircraft engineers at the National Museum of Flight to link experienced engineers on a conservation project with young people. They will be showing young people skills on Museum artefacts such as a plane or aircraft engine. The young people will be aged 16 plus and 18 months of funding has been secured from HLF.

At the National Museum of Flight we have one of the most significant aviation collections in the UK and Europe. We are restoring, conserving and have launched two redeveloped WWII hangers. Contained within the exhibitions are stories from real people who have been part of aviation in Scotland and beyond. Volunteers supported us extensively in gathering this information and they have been involved in interviewing people all over the country that have memories of the airfield.”

Critical Success Factors

Staff highlighted that the involvement of volunteers needs to be well structured and they ensure staff are clear about how volunteers are able to support the organisations work. “We run volunteer management training for staff that includes selecting, training and supporting volunteers. We’ve put in place as much as we can. We also provide extensive guidance for our volunteers through the provision of policies, procedures, annual appraisal, etc.

The role of the volunteer co-ordinator is critical as it needs someone to oversee it or it couldn’t be managed. All volunteers have a line manager on the ground (just an aspect of their role) and all departments have a department volunteer co-ordinator who helps with administration of volunteers (also just an aspect of their role). We’ve built in support and supervision for volunteers and support is always there if needed.

I think overall that most volunteers appreciate that it works well.”

Benefits of involving volunteers

For many volunteers, they are motivated by their desire to give something back through their knowledge, expertise and skills. Many have an active interest in the artefacts and staff quite often find that they are able to match volunteers in situations where there are joint benefits for both the organisation and the volunteer.

“Volunteers are able to benefit from personal development, such as improving health and wellbeing or enabling or further skills and knowledge that allows them for instance to apply for jobs that they might not have otherwise been able to do. We try and offer tangible things too and volunteers benefit from free access to all our Museum sites and exhibitions, discounts and invitations to events.



We want to connect people to each other and it encourages us to think about how we connect to the world as part of our mission and vision going forward. Involving volunteers provides a sense of community in both directions. We want to involve people because of their love of our museums and welcome the added value they bring to National Museums Scotland. Volunteers help hugely with capacity and volunteers feel connected to National Museums Scotland. It is a very inclusive activity and for many volunteers it's a bit of social club!

We're about to launch a new volunteer strategy and we're definitely aiming to involve volunteers in more things.”

Challenges & External Policy

National Museums Scotland is committed to supporting volunteer activity and sees this as a positive step in progressing wider initiatives such as the Scottish Government's agenda for young people.

“Constraints on funding and resources is a challenge for National Museums Scotland and the achievement of our strategic priorities can be and is assisted through the utilisation of volunteers whether this be about the allocation of time for staff to manage the volunteer activity or indeed about considering what resources might need to be made available to support the volunteers' work.

It is a rigorous process to set up a volunteer due to security so they've got to be really committed which can be a bit of a challenge. We also have a huge demand all the time which we often can't meet. However, we're in a good position as people know about us and can find out about what we're looking for.”

Future of volunteering

National Museums Scotland is in the midst of a period of significant development of its estate involving the launch of several new galleries and exhibition spaces at both the National Museum of Scotland and the National Museum of Flight. There are also other future plans that will enable National Museums to further celebrate and make accessible their collections.

“Our new volunteer strategy has been passed recently by the executive team. We’ve worked with staff to respond to business need. I think we have the structure in place that makes sure volunteers are integrated into the fabric of National Museums and recognised and celebrated. We anticipate that volunteers will continue to support us and be part of this provision.

We will continue to engage and involve our volunteers and as our museums change so may the variety of volunteer roles develop going forward. Future opportunities are in some cases linked to funding opportunities. We always want to keep improving but are careful not to grow beyond manageability. It has to grow in relation to capacity of staff to manage the activity they are involved in or we risk losing quality over quantity.”

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