



Museum Development East Midlands

Volunteering Needs Report 2021

An analysis of heritage volunteering
in the East Midlands during the Covid
19 pandemic, and beyond.



 @MusDevEM



**Museum
Development
East Midlands**

www.mdem.org.uk

MDEM Volunteering Needs Report 2021

Introduction

Volunteering in museums has been significantly impacted by the pandemic and the needs of museums in our region have evolved. As such we asked organisations across the East Midlands to complete a short survey in March 2021, to gather information about volunteering at all types of museums including those run wholly by volunteers or those with paid staff alongside a volunteer workforce.

The ambition for these results is that they will inform MDEM support in this area over the coming 12 months, and will feed into the national understanding of the impact of Covid on volunteering in museums. A dashboard of the main quantitative results [can be found here](#).

The report explores the findings from the survey and makes recommendations for tackling emerging challenges for volunteer management and development.

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Summary of results:

The results can be broken down into two main sections: An analysis of the impact of Covid on operations over the last 12 months and the imminent future; and the wider challenges and opportunities for volunteer workforces in the longer term.

Impact of the last 12 months on operations:

- On average museums reported losing 22% of their volunteer workforce over the last 12 months. Organisations in rural areas, villages or small towns lost on average 18% of their volunteers, whereas organisations in larger towns or cities lost 29% of their volunteers on average.
- When comparing the number of actively volunteering individuals in February 2020 and February 2021 we see a 76% decrease in numbers.
- The governance structure of an organisation had no effect on the number of volunteers lost over the last year. Showing all museum types faced similar issues, and other factors had more of an influence when determining the impact of Covid on the workforce.
- Almost 50% of museums are unsure or certain that their lack of volunteering capacity will affect their ability to operate to normal levels in 2021.
- Areas which were felt would be hit most hard by reduction in volunteering numbers due to the pandemic were;
 - Schools and learning opportunities
 - Events and on-site experiences
 - Visitor engagement
 - Weekend and holiday cover
 - Front of House
 - Collections Care

The volunteer workforce moving forward:

Many organisations have reviewed their volunteer strategy and see an opportunity to engage more diverse volunteers with more inclusive opportunities that fit the museums current and future needs.

The top 5 priorities for museums over the coming 12 months in order were:

1. Retaining and developing volunteers
2. Diversifying volunteers
3. Volunteer management skills
4. Ensuring a safe volunteering environment
5. Safe recruitment practices

The most common volunteering offer from museums was 'scheduled volunteering on site' (93%), and event volunteering (77%). The least offered was 'internships' (15%), remote volunteering (33%) and micro-volunteering roles (40%).

The museums that adapted their volunteer offer by offering remote and micro-volunteering opportunities during lockdown, are more likely to open at their usual operating level 2021 than those who did not.

Volunteer Skills Museums Have	Volunteer Skills Museums Need
<p>Top five skills already on museums boards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial Management 94% • Leadership 91% • Governance 87% • Project Management 84% • Research 77% 	<p>Top five skills needed on museum boards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audience development 78% • Inclusive practice 76% • Interpretation planning 64% • Marketing 59% • Digital skills 55%
<p>Top five skills museums already have (excluding Boards):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Front of house 85% • Research 78% • Catering 72% • Retail 72% • Collections Care 68% 	<p>Top five skills museums need (excluding Boards):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Audience development 83% - Partnerships 76% - HR 71% - Marketing 69% - Business Planning 67%

Recommendations:

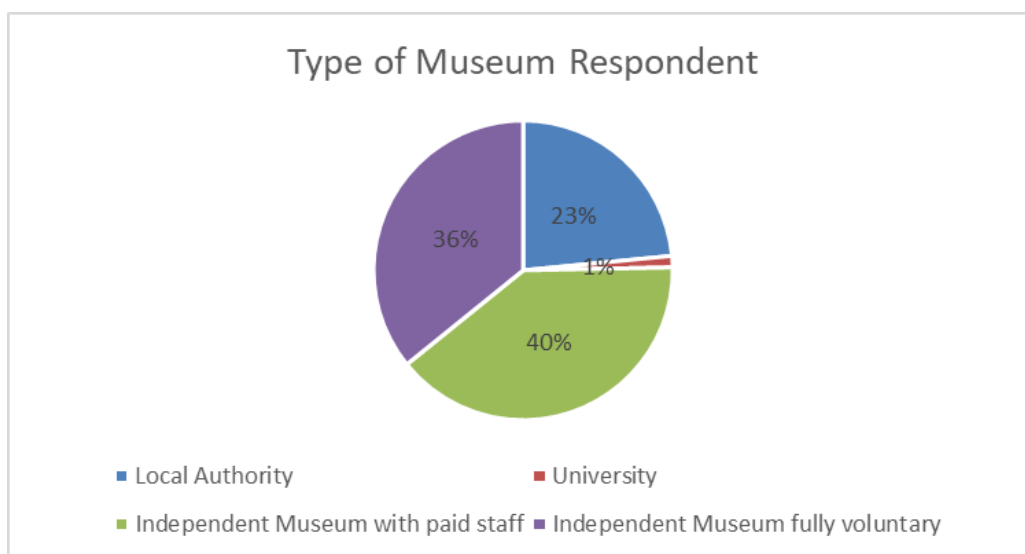
- Many volunteers although intending to re-join the museum workforce, have not volunteered for many months. Consideration needs to be given to how to maintain volunteer engagement so numbers don't drop off further.
- Infrastructure into remote and micro volunteering will allow a more flexible volunteering model, more resilient to lockdowns and other changes.
- When able to volunteer again some roles may be less suitable than others to carry out in a safe and appealing way. Therefore, museums may need to rethink location and format of volunteering.
- Particular operational pinch points may come during weekends and summer holidays as volunteers may be less inclined to work these times due to other pulls and commitments.
- Recruitment needs to ensure a core group of volunteers that can operate the museum in a basic way is drawn from a diverse range of people so that issues such as shielding do not disproportionately affect the workforce.
- Recruitment also needs to focus on audience engagement, interpretation and digital skills, especially at governance level.
- There needs to be skills development opportunities for volunteers in audience development, marketing and digital
- When creating museum support programmes, it is important not to group participants by museum governance model, but instead consider relevant characteristics such as locality e.g. rural/urban.

Survey Results

Who responded:

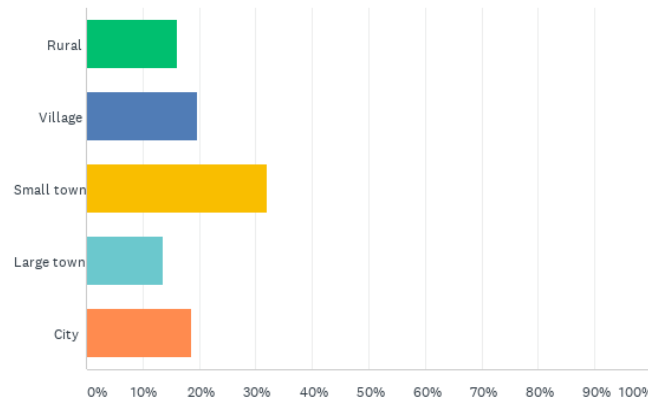
The survey was open for 2 weeks and sent to MDEM’s mailing list of heritage organisations and museums in the region. There were 81 responses, representing 78 unique organisations. With 62 being from Accredited or working towards Accreditation museums, as well as representation from several organisations from the wider heritage sector.

There was an even spread in survey respondents by organisational type. This provides a true reflection of the museum typology across the region and as such results have not been weighted, and statements made in this analysis are used to represent the wider East Midlands Museum sector.



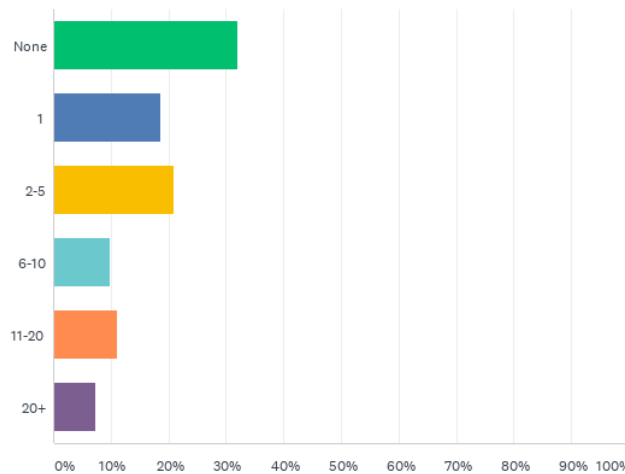
We specifically asked the location of museums (in terms of urban or rural) to be able to understand the different needs of these two areas. We know from the MDEM Annual Museums Survey that there is an increase in volunteer workforce versus paid workforce in more rural locations. While the diversity of museums was well represented in the survey, 68% of respondents were from sites in small towns or more rural areas, highlighting a reliance from high numbers of museums in the region on rural volunteering which creates its own challenges such as transport/ access, skills and diversity.

Q6 Location of museum:



This is further highlighted by the response to the question concerning number of paid staff in an organisation. 32% had no paid staff and a further 40% had below 5. This is significant as it is unlikely there would be a specific paid volunteer manager role in these organisations, and therefore managing/ overseeing volunteer workforce development is more often done by volunteers themselves or as part of a larger role. For those that did have more than 5 paid staff, it was fairly evenly spread across the location categories.

Q7 How many paid staff does your organisation currently have?



The impact of Covid on volunteering:

It was reported on average, organisations lost 22% of their volunteers over the pandemic. Only 21% of organisations stated they felt they had not lost any volunteers due to the pandemic.

Organisations in rural areas, villages and small towns lost on average 18% of their volunteers, whereas organisations in larger towns or cities lost 29% of their volunteers on average. This may partly be explained by the proportion of volunteer numbers in different organisations. Typically, larger staffed museums tend to have fewer volunteers per member of staff, therefore one volunteer

leaving the workforce will have a bigger proportional impact to one volunteer leaving a smaller organisation.

Interestingly, the governance type of museum did not materially change the amount of volunteers lost as seen in the following breakdown:

Museum Type	% of volunteers lost over the last year
Independent museum with no paid staff	21 %
Independent museum with some paid staff	20%
Local Authority museum	22%

The pandemic enforced a reduction in mobility and as sites were closed and restricted on-site volunteering opportunities, alternative methods of volunteer engagement were necessary. Sadly, some reported a loss of volunteers due to ill health related to the pandemic. When there were opportunities to re-open/ meet between lockdowns, many reported reduced numbers of available volunteers due to those shielding or isolating – due in part, to the older demographic of the majority of volunteers. A reluctance in the existing volunteer workforce to adapt to remote volunteering projects was reported by many. Lack of physical access to sites posed a major problem and some volunteers were not engaged with their museums at all.

This is shown when looking at the number of volunteers contributing in February 2020 versus February 2021 as shown in the table below:

Date	Number of individual volunteers contributing at respondent museums
February 2020	4295
February 2021	1011

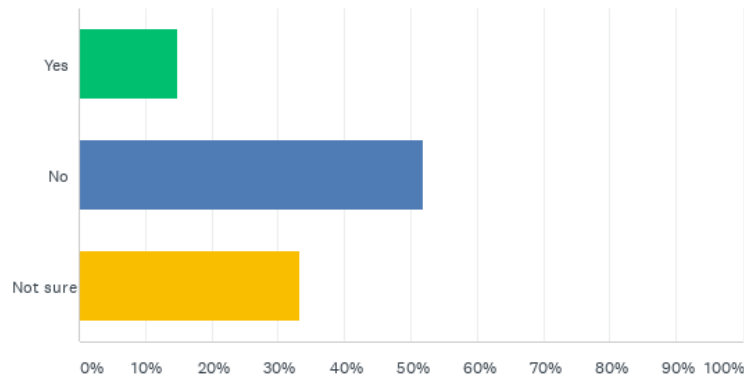
This shows a decrease of 76% in volunteer activity in the February before lockdown and during the pandemic. This is not surprising due to the lockdown restrictions, but it does show that only 1 in 4 of previously engaged volunteers did continue to contribute throughout the pandemic and through open text responses, we know many of these were in governance roles. The reported 22% drop in volunteer numbers may increase again depending on appropriate opportunities and confidence to return.

2021 Operations:

The picture concerning opening hours is still unclear in the region. There is almost a split 50/50 between those organisations that do not feel volunteer capacity will affect their ability to re-open effectively, and those that do or are unsure. MDEM will monitor this impact throughout 2021.

When split this by governance type, the only significant difference is that Local Authority museums are much more certain of their ability to reopen, due to their lack of reliance on volunteers at an operational level.

Q11 Do you think you will have to reduce operating hours or suspend operations due to the unavailability of volunteers in 2021?



When asked what area of operations museums felt would be impacted due to lack of volunteering capacity, those listed below were the most commonly cited:

- Schools and learning opportunities
- Events and on-site experiences
- Visitor engagement
- Weekend and holiday cover
- Front of House
- Collections Care

The reasons for the above were reported as - lack of available volunteers due to vulnerability, as well as these functions taking place in small spaces that did not allow for social distancing.

It was also felt by some organisations that weekend and holiday cover for operations could be difficult when some form of normality returns to people’s lives, as volunteers may have less time to dedicate to museums if re-engaging in social activities themselves, particularly in summer of 2021.

Volunteering Offer:

When asked what type of volunteering museums were offering before the pandemic, the following was stated:

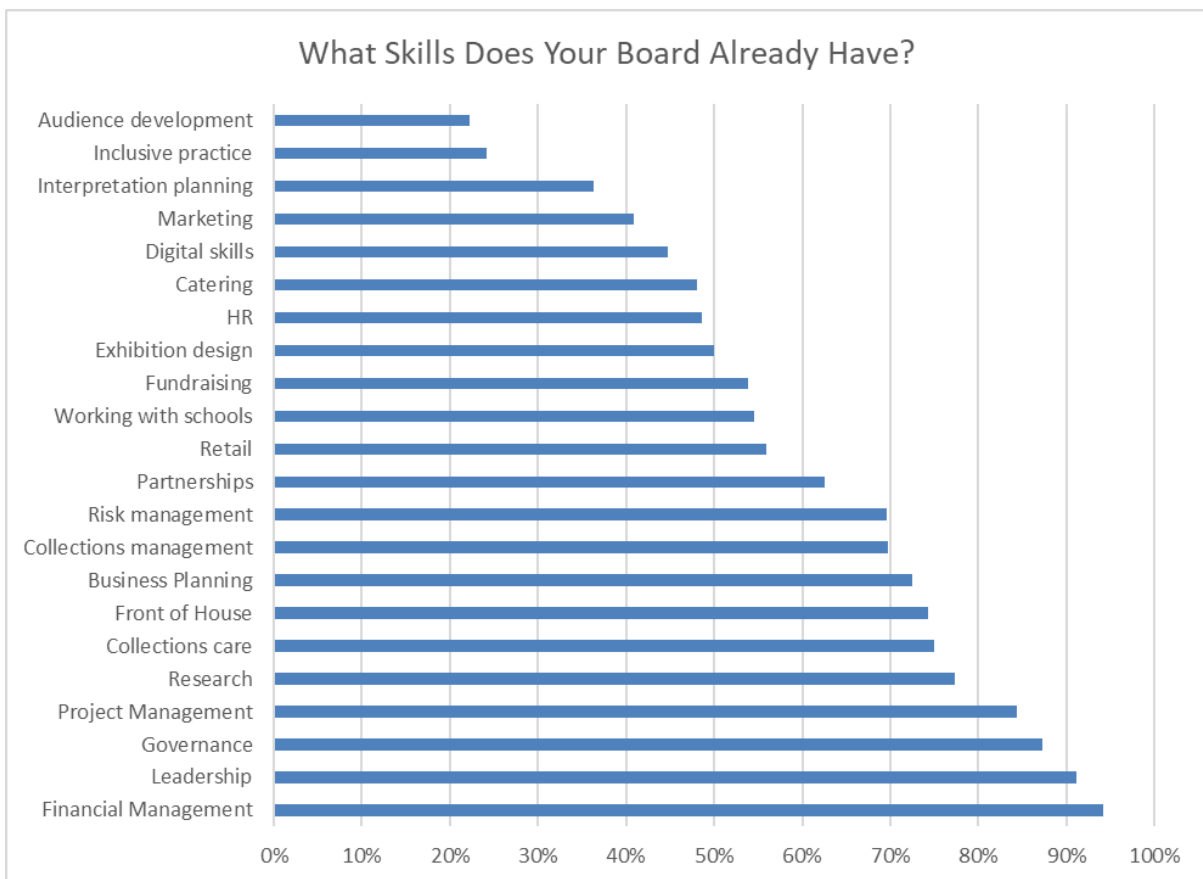
Roles Offered	Percentage of respondent museums who offer this role
Collections Management and Care	75%
Events (e.g. summer holiday activities)	73%
Governance (trustees)	62%
Research	60.0%
Exhibitions	57%
Talks	56%
General Maintenance	56%
Education/ learning/ schools	54%
Front of House/ retail	51%
Gardeners	47%
Social media/ website maintenance	44%
Tour guides	44%
Room guides	33%
Marketing/ promotions	30%
Costumed interpreters	9%

When asked what type of volunteering was on offer, the top response was ‘on-site scheduled volunteering’ (93%), ‘event volunteering’ (77%) and ‘ad-hoc site volunteering’ (58%). The areas of least opportunity were ‘remote volunteering’ (33%), ‘internships’ (15%) and ‘short-term volunteering opportunities’ (40%). As many museums are worried about whether volunteers will return to site-based activity, more investment in developing alternative opportunities may be needed e.g. remote volunteering and other shorter-term opportunities.

When filtering responses, the museums who did offer remote volunteering and micro volunteering opportunities stated that 60% would not have to reduce opening hours in 2021 due to a lack of volunteers, compared to 52% of those who did not offer these. This shows that museums with a more flexible volunteering opportunities are more resilient while meeting the needs of both volunteers and the organisation.

Governance Needs:

The survey asked independent museums, what roles they already had on their Board, and what roles they needed. The chart below explores what skills respondents already have:



The top five skills already on museums boards were:

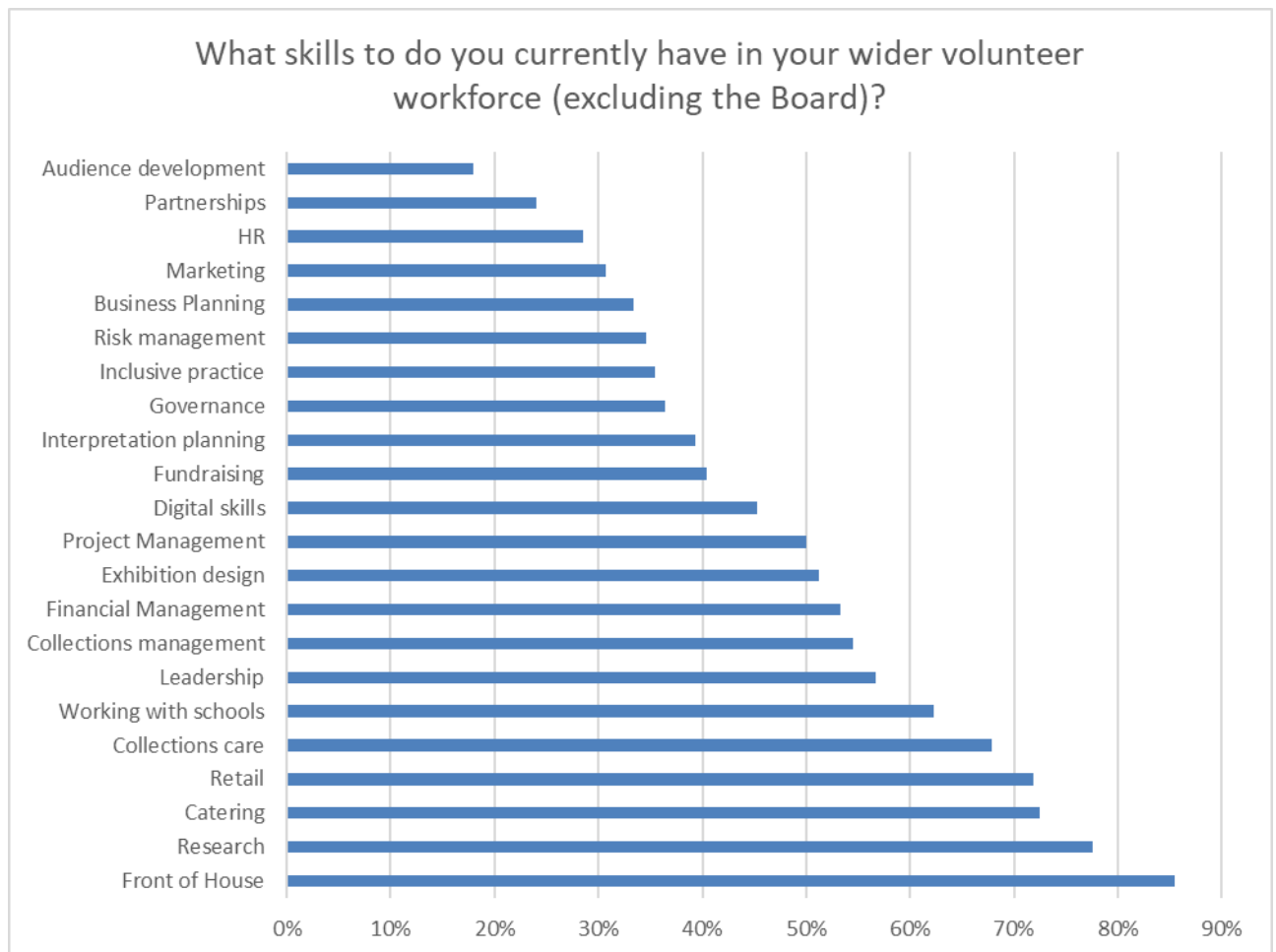
- Financial Management 94%
- Leadership 91%
- Governance 87%
- Project Management 84%
- Research 77%

The top five most needed skills on museums boards were:

- Audience development 78%
- Inclusive practice 76%
- Interpretation planning 64%
- Marketing 59%
- Digital skills 55%

Board skills are heavily skewed towards ‘business skills’ and those linked to management of people or assets. Communication and audience engagement skills are the weakest areas. In particular, the lack of digital skills has been exposed through the pandemic, as museum activity was digitally reimaged to reach an online audience. As such, these are the areas to be targeted as part of future recruitment campaigns and such skills are also needed amongst the wider volunteer workforce.

Skills gaps across the whole organisation were identified through the question below:



Top five skills museums already have (excluding Boards):

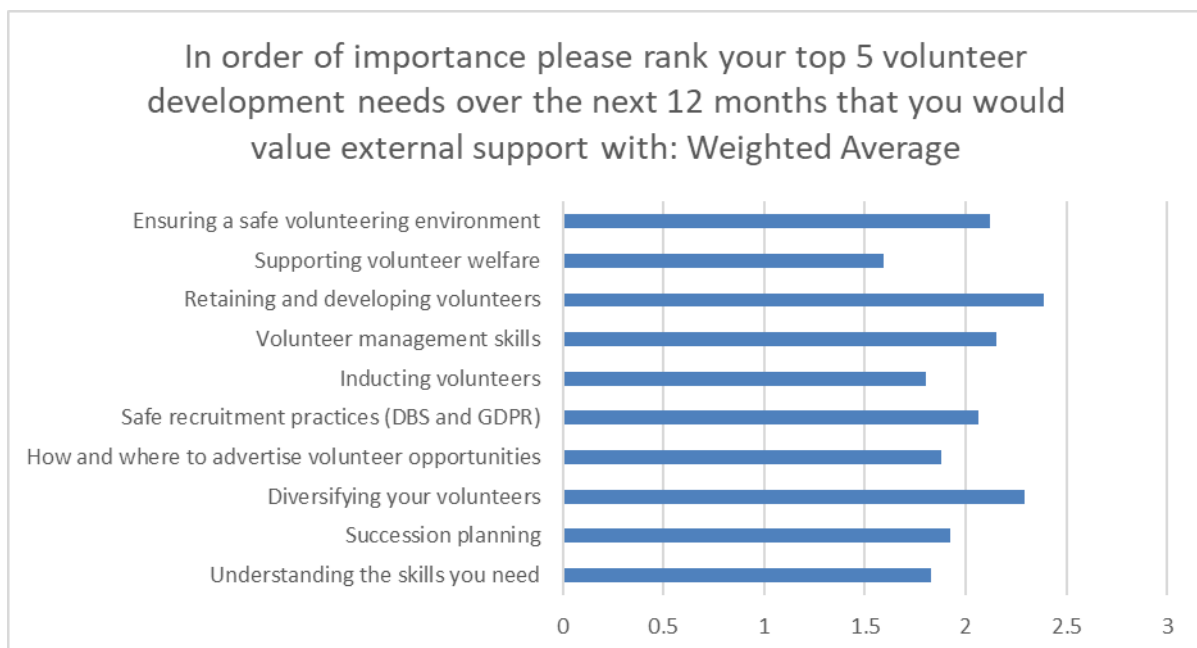
- Front of house 85%
- Research 78%
- Catering 72%
- Retail 72%
- Collections Care 68%

Top five skills museums need (excluding Boards):

- Audience development 83%
- Partnerships 76%
- HR 71%
- Marketing 69%
- Business Planning 67%

This is a different and more operational picture than at Board level which is unsurprising, including skills such as in retail and catering which are non-museum specific roles. However, the skills that are identified as needed across the wider volunteer workforce are a mix of audience development skills as well as business skills such as HR and planning.

Asked about organisational priorities relating to volunteers over the next 12 months, the following was reported:



The top 5 priorities in order were:

- Retaining and developing volunteers
- Diversifying volunteers
- Volunteer management skills
- Ensuring a safe volunteering environment
- Safe recruitment practices

The reported focus was on retaining and developing an existing workforce and recruiting to improve capacity and address skills gaps. Although volunteer welfare had been cited as a priority throughout the open text elements of the survey, in this ranking it scored lowest although this can arguably be seen as included in the retention and volunteer management elements.

Lessons learned on volunteering throughout the pandemic:

Many respondents identified the advancement in the use of digital technologies as a huge area of improvement having had to adapt to new ways of communicating with staff, volunteers and audiences as well as working remotely. More flexible approaches to volunteering, that organisations had been forced to explore, had been beneficial and would continue beyond any relaxation of social distancing measures.

Many organisations reported focusing on updating plans and policies while normal working practice was restricted, as well as rethinking some other ways of working and establishing new partnerships.

Some reported an increase in interest in volunteering from less typical candidates, and the break had given the organisation time to rethink the volunteering strategy to become more adaptable and responsive to meet future needs.

'We have been able to completely review the museum's volunteering operations and restructure it in order to offer an improved volunteer experience and ensure that our voluntary workforce receives adequate support and guidance. We have also been able to trial remote volunteering with one or two volunteers to see whether it is compatible with some of our outstanding projects. The lockdown has also meant that more effort has been put into keeping in touch with volunteers, e.g. hosting morning coffee every couple of months via Zoom and publishing a regular volunteer newsletter.'

Survey respondent

'It has offered us potential new way of interacting with our volunteers and allowed us to take a step back from the volunteer role we offer and reevaluate them against our needs to make them better fit in with our day to day operational requirements.'

Survey respondent

'Remote volunteering opportunities, remote meets, strategy development opportunities, social media recruitment, online engagement, visualising the need and urgency of diversifying the volunteering demographic and widening the perceptions of what volunteering can be.'

Survey respondent

The greatest reported negatives were losing touch with existing volunteers and not being able to offer roles and opportunities for individuals to continue to engage. This highlights the wider benefits of volunteering such as socialising and addressing loneliness and isolation, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. It was felt that if more remote or digital volunteering roles were offered, it is still important to consider those who cannot or do not want to volunteer in this way, and how to build in the wider mental health benefits which on-site volunteering offers in all roles.

Conclusion:

The survey results provide a snapshot in time, and capture how social distancing, lockdowns and restricted site access have impacted volunteering in the sector.

The most pressing impact has been the actual loss of volunteers leading to an uncertainty about some organisations' ability to reopen fully in 2021. On average, museums reported losing 22% of their volunteering workforce. The effects of this are felt by all museums, however organisations in rural areas, villages or small towns are impacted more significantly. In comparing February 2020 with February 2021 there was a 76% decrease in volunteer numbers, most likely due to lack of access to sites and shielding/ isolating volunteers (as the majority were older, more vulnerable volunteers).

The governance type of organisations had no effect on the number of volunteers lost over the last year showing all types and sizes of museum faced similar issues, and that other factors were more influential when determining the impact of Covid on the workforce. However, some museums were more dependent on volunteers than others, to fulfil operational/ front of house roles impacting the museum's ability to reopen successfully.

Almost 50% of museums felt their lack of volunteering capacity would affect their ability to operate to previous levels in 2021. Many organisations reviewed their volunteer strategy and saw an opportunity to engage more diverse volunteers with more inclusive opportunities that fit current and future needs.

Areas that would be most hard hit by reduced volunteering numbers due to the pandemic were reported as:

- Schools and learning opportunities
- Events and on-site experiences
- Visitor engagement
- Weekend and holiday cover
- Front of House
- Collections Care

Looking forward, the range of volunteering opportunities and workforce skills appropriate to organisational needs, will impact the speed of recovery. The survey showed those that offered a range of volunteering opportunities were more resilient to the impact of the pandemic and recovery from it.

Museum boards and the wider volunteer workforce already have a range of skills but there are gaps that need to be focused on having been exposed during the pandemic. Diversification of volunteers was recognised as a necessity when looking forward, and so methods of recruitment, organisational needs and operational flexibility need to be reviewed to ensure development of a volunteer workforce that supports organisational sustainability and resilience in the face of a crisis.

The coming months and years feel uncertain, and a need for further support in this area has been acknowledged. Museums and the heritage sector in general, rely hugely on volunteers across much

or all of their operation, and priorities for support need to be identified. Museums reported a mixture of priorities for addressing volunteer development showing the complexity of the picture, however 4 key priorities emerged:

1. developing and diversifying the workforce – broadening the skills set
2. ensuring a safe environment, whether that be physical safety jeopardised by the pandemic, or safer recruiting practices
3. volunteer management skills - embedding change
4. having a strategic overview of new operating models with volunteering at the heart

For more information about this survey, please contact *Sarah Hartshorne, Programme Officer* Museum Development East Midlands: sarah.hartshorne@leics.gov.uk