



## Museums Partnership Reading Volunteer Policy



### Introduction

Museums Partnership Reading (MPR) is a strategic partnership between Reading Museum and The Museum of English Rural Life, supported by the Arts Council England's [National Portfolio Organisation](#) programme.

The Museum of English Rural Life is owned and managed by the [University of Reading](#). We use our diverse and surprising collection to explore how the skills and experiences of farmers and craftspeople, past and present, can help shape our lives now and into the future. We work alongside rural people, local communities and specialist researchers to create displays and activities that engage with important debates about the future of food and the ongoing relevance of the countryside to all our lives.

Reading Museum is part of Reading Borough Council's cultural services. We have provided award-winning opportunities for learning, inspiration and enjoyment since 1883. From our earliest days we have collected archaeology, art, natural history, and ethnography, and objects relating to Reading. Today we focus on collecting linked with Reading, its people and environment, and proudly celebrate [our town and its fascinating history](#).

Our nationally respected [school loans service](#) started in 1911 and has offered opportunities for people to handle real artefacts ever since. Innovative engagement with [our collections](#) through learning, community and volunteering is integral to our DNA.

Museums Partnership Reading work together to provide cultural opportunities for Reading's young people and diverse communities, through schools, [volunteering](#), digital engagement and exhibitions. Our work is only possible through the skills and dedication of our staff, [volunteers](#), friends and local communities.

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## 1. Purpose of the volunteer policy

Our volunteer policy describes how Museums Partnership Reading (MPR) - the partnership between The Museum of English Rural Life (The MERL) and Reading Museum - recruits, involves, and manages volunteers.

The purpose of the volunteer policy is to acknowledge the value of our volunteers, and achieve clear, workable principles within which volunteers and their supervisors can operate.

This policy seeks both to meet the volunteer's needs and the requirements of the museums. It is relevant to all current and potential volunteers and is an important document for staff who participate in recruiting, developing and supervising volunteers.

## 2. Why do we involve volunteers?

We offer a variety of well-supported, high quality volunteering opportunities to our local community to improve wellbeing, connect people to their personal histories and identities, and promote Reading's rich cultural heritage.

We aim to reflect the diverse community of Reading in our volunteering team. MPR develops ambitious projects that enhance Reading's reputation regionally, nationally and internationally.

Volunteers greatly enhance a wide range of programmes, making our collections and events more accessible to more people.

Volunteers help us undertake projects and reach audiences that would otherwise not be possible, expanding and enriching our offer.

Volunteers help inform and shape how we operate, develop our programmes and engage audiences.

Examples of roles include community engagement, education outreach, collections care and management, supporting front of house activities and events.

Volunteer opportunities take place at the museums, at community events as part of our outreach programme, and virtual volunteering from home.

Undergraduate and postgraduate University students who volunteer with us gain practical insights into their related studies as part of their university experience, gaining additional familiarity with the world of work as they prepare for employment.

Voluntary involvement also takes the shape of structured work experience placements in support of different areas of museum work. These opportunities are delivered in



partnership with targeted schools and higher education institutions, youth or community organisations.

### 3. What is a volunteer?



A volunteer is someone who offers their time and skills willingly to an organisation, without expectation of financial reward, (except in some circumstances the reimbursement of expenses – see Expenses section below).

A volunteer is not a replacement or alternative to a member of staff; their role is always different from that of a paid member of staff.

Volunteers are a valuable resource who can offer a wide range of skills, life experiences and fresh perspectives, which complement our existing offer and staff skills.

The volunteer role is based on mutual trust and understanding.

We do not enter into binding contracts or personal agreements with volunteers. No enforceable obligation, contractual or otherwise will be enforced upon volunteers to attend.

Nevertheless, due to the important role that volunteers have in helping deliver programmes and activities, volunteers are expected to notify their supervisors as soon as possible if they cannot attend an arranged shift. This enables the museums to make alternative plans for activities involving volunteers.

### 4. Inclusion

We respect and value diversity within our volunteering team. We are committed to equitable opportunities for all. To promote inclusion for those who are under-represented in the museum sector, we offer a range of innovative opportunities that build skills and experience for a wider range of people, including mentored volunteering roles.





We encourage applicants who are under-represented in our current volunteering team to apply, including ethnically diverse applicants, disabled and neurodivergent applicants, and applicants from under-represented socio-economic backgrounds.

The acceptance of a volunteer for a particular role will be made on the individual's suitability to carry out the specified tasks, subject to the needs and restrictions of the museums.

### Accessibility

We are committed to making our museums and the volunteer opportunities offered as accessible as possible.

Volunteers are invited on application to inform us if there are any things that we can do to remove barriers to their participation. This is to ensure that the museums can best accommodate the needs of the volunteer. If someone declares they have a condition that will affect them in that role then we will attempt to overcome them wherever possible, and with the volunteer's permission, share this information on a need-to-know basis to ensure participation is as full as possible.

Some volunteering activities take place in historic buildings that might not be fully accessible to some people with certain disabilities. Some tasks may be more suited to volunteers who have a full range of mobility, vision etc.

If participation is not possible, we would do our best to suggest another suitable role. We also offer opportunities for volunteers to support our work 'virtually' away from the museum – such as at home – using digital means.

### Age

We do not specify a general volunteer upper age limit. We recognise the contribution made by older volunteers through their valuable knowledge and experience. We would conduct an open discussion if at any point a volunteer continuing in a role would be detrimental to their own or other people's health and safety.

There is no minimum age requirement for volunteers, provided they are undertaking suitable tasks for which there is no legal minimum, they are supervised by an appropriate

adult and not left alone. In practice this does mean that some roles are not suitable for under 18s. A parent or guardian must give written permission if the volunteer is under 18.

### Work Experience Placements

Priority for formal work experience placements are given to organisations and programmes that are recognised priority partners.

### Benefits

Volunteering should not affect the right to Income Support, Incapacity Benefit, Employment and Support Allowance or Disability Living Allowance. Those on JSA (Job Seekers' Allowance) are entitled to volunteer, as long as they are actively seeking employment and free to attend an interview with 48 hours' notice. Individuals should, however, notify Jobcentre Plus that they have begun volunteering.

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/benefits/benefits-introduction/how-volunteering-affects-your-benefits/>

### Declaration of convictions

As part of the online application process, the applicant is required to tick a box to declare whether they have any previous criminal convictions (spent and unspent). Having a criminal record is not necessarily a barrier to volunteering. An information box next to this section explains that "Convictions do not necessarily stop you from volunteering, and this can be discussed in more detail with the Volunteer Coordinator if you have any concerns".

If a volunteering opportunity includes work that involves close and unsupervised contact with children or Adults at Risk – known as Regulated Activity – the applicant will be required to complete a DBS check, at no cost to the volunteer. Such roles are rare, and an example is Code Club, teaching children in a classroom format, without their parent/ guardian.

### International volunteers

We welcome applications from prospective volunteers who are currently living in the UK. This includes sanctuary seekers (a refugee or asylum seekers in the UK) who are living in the UK at the time of application.

Prospective international volunteers who normally live outside the UK should check with the UK Border Agency that their visa permits volunteering in Britain. We will ask to see two forms of ID (e.g. passport, driving licence) and evidence of visa status prior to the volunteer starting the role.

## 5. Recruitment

### Devising and promoting volunteer roles

We offer a variety of opportunities and experiences that reflect the wide range of activities and projects at Museums Partnership Reading.

Every volunteer role is created to help develop, enhance and support projects and operations.

A specific volunteer role description is prepared for each potential vacancy by the Volunteer

Coordinator and the Supervisor of that role (a member of staff).

The purpose of the role description is to provide the volunteer with all the necessary information about their tasks and for staff to understand the volunteer's role. Roles for volunteers can be adapted where possible to suit the needs of the individual.

As vacancies arise, MPR promote volunteering roles on the [volunteering platform](#). They are sometimes featured on social media platforms and Reading Voluntary Action's database.

Prospective volunteers are invited to visit the online volunteering platform to view active vacancies.

New volunteer opportunities are also visible to existing volunteers on the [volunteering platform](#) and highlighted in the platform's News section.

Role descriptions and volunteer opportunities can be emailed, posted, or described over the phone, as an alternative for those who are not confident in using computers or have limited digital access.

### Expenses

Reading Museum will offer to cover the travelling expenses for volunteers who are full-time university students, and those claiming unemployment benefits, for journeys within the Reading Borough boundary.

The MERL will offer to cover the travelling expenses for volunteers who are full-time university students, and those claiming unemployment benefits, for journeys within the Reading Borough and Wokingham Borough Council boundaries.

Expenses will be reimbursed at the Reading Borough Council rate or University of Reading rate, depending on the venue the volunteer attended.

Anybody wishing to be reimbursed should discuss the process with their supervisor and the Volunteer Coordinator first.

Both Reading Museum and The MERL can cover volunteer expenses for any travel required to external venues, such as travelling to training courses or to outreach events.

Under exceptional circumstances to enable volunteers to participate in specific projects and activity, funding may be available to meet volunteer expenses beyond the criteria outlined above.

### Recruitment process

An online application form is used on our [volunteering platform](#) to ensure the recruitment process is consistent.

We are lucky enough to receive a high volume of applications to volunteer with our programme, so we cannot accept every volunteer who completes an application form.

The application form allows the applicant to highlight areas of particular interest, their qualities, skills and abilities.

This information will be downloaded into an anonymous shortlisting table, which helps us to identify potential matches for a suitable available role. CVs are not included in this initial shift, so the applicant should ensure relevant information is in the basic application fields.

When more applicants apply for a particular role than we have vacancies, we invite a selection of applicants to interview, based on the information provided on the application form.

A hard copy application form is available for those who are not confident in using computers or have limited digital access.

We require every applicant to supply contact details for two referees who are not family members, prior to their start, and these will be followed up.

There is a 'required' tick box which must be ticked by the applicant as part of the application process on the volunteering platform, to confirm they have read and accept this Volunteering Policy.

### Interview and selection

Once a potential match has been identified from the application form, an informal meeting will be arranged between the applicant, the Volunteer Coordinator, and a member of staff responsible for the prospective role (Supervisor). This can either be in person, on Zoom or Teams, or if necessary over the phone.

This is an opportunity for the prospective volunteer and the supervisor to discuss the role, the applicant's availability, and agree that the role is mutually beneficial. Volunteers working with children or Adults at Risk would be interviewed by two appropriate staff members.

If we interview more applicants than the number of places we can offer, the Volunteer Coordinator and the Supervisor will offer the places to those who have demonstrated through their interview responses that they most closely meet the requirements of the volunteer role.

Due to time constraints, we are not always able to contact applicants interested in a particular role who were not shortlisted, but they will remain on our waiting list and will be considered for other roles when an opportunity matches their interest. Our standard holding reply, which an applicant will receive after application, makes clear they have now joined a waiting list. It also suggests alternative roles or opportunities locally.

We write to applicants on the waiting list at least annually to clear down the database and ensure only people still waiting to be matched stay on our waiting list.



## 6. Induction

A suitably trained member of staff will carry out an induction for every new volunteer.

An induction checklist, which will include the following items, will be completed and held on record:

- Health and Safety
- Fire procedures including location of fire exits
- A short tour of relevant areas, highlighting all facilities
- Procedures for signing in and out of the building
- The typical number of hours and timing of activity to be undertaken
- Confirmation of who is the supervisor for the role
- Where appropriate the allocation of a buddy or mentor to support the new volunteer
- Confirm emergency contact details
- Signing any relevant Copyright transfer forms
- Procedures or routines relevant to the volunteer's role
- Procedures for claiming expenses, where relevant

The new volunteer is asked to agree to the terms of the Volunteer Agreement. This is not a legally binding contract, but sets out expectations for both the volunteer and for MPR.

## 7. Training

MPR recognises that volunteers require satisfying work and the opportunity for personal development. We support our volunteers through training so that they can successfully undertake their role. We provide ongoing communication to enhance a volunteer's performance, and provide further opportunities within the organisation where appropriate.

Training also offers an opportunity to explain the standards we expect, and to encourage and support volunteers to achieve and maintain them.

## 8. Health and Safety

We have a duty of care to avoid exposing our volunteers to health and safety risks. All volunteers are made aware of the Health and Safety policy and any practical safety issues as part of their induction. Volunteers receive Health and Safety training relevant to their role.

Our Health and Safety Policy is summarised at induction and available on request from the Volunteer Coordinator. It recognises that Health and Safety is the responsibility of everyone in the organisation.

We have a robust risk management process which encompasses activities that may be undertaken by volunteers. We assess the tasks involved in every new volunteering opportunity and to consider the environment in which they will be conducted, removing any significant hazards and mitigating any remaining risks.

Risk assessments are shared with volunteers if they are relevant to the role they are undertaking.

If a volunteer activity might lead to risk of injury from manual handling, volunteers will be trained by a competent person, with periodic refreshers.

#### 9. Safeguarding children and Adults at Risk

To safeguard the welfare of children and Adults at Risk, The MERL is guided by the [University of Reading's Safeguarding Children and Adults at Risk Policy](#). Reading Museum is guided by its own child and Adults at Risk protection policy, which is available for all volunteers to read in the ['Files' Section of the volunteer platform](#), as part of the induction process.

The guidance in this section of the Volunteer Policy can also be found in the ['Files' Section of the volunteer platform](#).

The Museums review and update their policies on a regular basis, and they include online engagement with children and young people.

Each organisation shares common principles.

#### **Some key good practice guidance is outlined below for all volunteers working with children and/or Adults at Risk:**

Staff and volunteers are expected to act responsibly and maintain a professional manner at all times, ensuring that behaviour, language, gestures, and dress code are appropriate.

- Situations where there is only one staff member or volunteer present with a child or Adult at Risk should be avoided
- Volunteers must not share personal contact details with children or Adults at Risk
- Volunteers must not take photos of children or Adults at Risk, unless asked to do so by a member of staff for project purposes
- If it is necessary to contact a child or Adult at Risk, volunteers must ask a member of staff to contact the person using their university or RBC email

Staff and volunteers will be expected to maintain professional boundaries at all times. Intimate or sexual relationships between staff/volunteers and children under the age of 18 or Adults at Risk are an abuse of trust which may constitute a criminal offence.

- Physical contact should be avoided. Staff and volunteers should be aware of personal space and should avoid touching another person
- Reassure the child, but do not make promises of confidentiality which might not be feasible in the light of subsequent developments
- Only trained first aiders from the staff team should administer First Aid

If anyone (staff, volunteer, students or member of the public) has concerns over a child/ Adult at Risk, or a child/ Adult at Risk confides in a member of staff in relation to another member of staff/volunteer's or student's actions, they should report this immediately to a Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL). The DSL will obtain any notes of the allegation from the member of staff or student.

The Designated Safeguarding Lead at The MERL is Isabel Hughes and at Reading Museum it is Rebecca James and Guja Bandini.

If at any point it is unclear who to contact, volunteers should ask for assistance from the Volunteer Coordinator.

Any concerns about a child may be reported directly to <https://brighterfuturesforchildren.org/concerned-about-a-child/>

Or for Adults at Risk go directly to <http://www.sabberkshirewest.co.uk/>

#### 10. Communication and Support

Most volunteers will have a named supervisor. Whilst carrying out their role on site, the volunteer's first contact for support is their assigned supervisor who will provide regular support and guidance. An exception to this is Events and Activities volunteering, where the volunteer will be supported by the relevant Event Lead or member of Visitor Services staff on the day.

The Volunteer Coordinator and Volunteer Administrator provide support for volunteering enquiries via email or telephone, and onsite in person.

A new volunteer is welcome to carry out trial shifts. This is to ensure both the volunteer and MPR are happy that the volunteer is suited to and enjoying the role. We suggest a period of four weeks for trying a role, but volunteers are free to end their involvement at any time before or after this period.

If a volunteer is finding an aspect of their role difficult, this should be raised with their supervisor, or if preferred, with the Volunteer Coordinator. Extra training and support may be offered.

It is possible that after additional support or guidance, an individual volunteer may be unwilling or unable to meet the requirements of the role, in which case, the Volunteer Coordinator will suggest that this volunteer arrangement is ended. We will always explore whether there is a suitable alternative role at that point in time.

An informal exit interview or feedback form will be offered to volunteers leaving us. This is to help us monitor how well we are involving volunteers and understand any learning points.

#### 11. Problem Solving

MPR is committed to dealing with any problem that arises as quickly and fairly as possible. We aim to treat all volunteers fairly, objectively and consistently. Supervisors are responsible for handling any day-to-day problems experienced by the volunteer in the first instance.

We have set procedures in place for problem solving if a more serious incident has occurred. These can be seen below.

#### **Volunteer Problem solving procedure**

We receive every complaint seriously and investigate every incident thoroughly and fairly.

#### Part 1:

In the case of a volunteer or member of staff making a complaint against a volunteer or a member of staff, they must first speak to the Volunteer Coordinator.

It is the Volunteer Coordinator's responsibility to ensure that the volunteer's views are heard, noted and acted upon promptly and they will aim for a positive and amicable solution for both parties.

A meeting will take place between the relevant member of staff, the volunteer and the Volunteer Coordinator to work towards a practical conclusion. If practicable the issue should be resolved at this stage.

If the issue continues then the volunteer will meet with the relevant member of staff, and a member of the management team. Further investigation into the incident will take place.

If the complaint is about the Volunteer Coordinator, the volunteer must address their line manager, Isabel Hughes (Head of Curatorial & Public Engagement at The MERL)

#### Part 2:

If someone makes a complaint about a volunteer, their supervisor should look at the reasons, supported by the Volunteer Coordinator, to agree any measures which may be taken to solve the problem, such as training or changing the volunteer's tasks.

We take every case seriously and if an allegation of serious misconduct is made against a volunteer, the volunteer will be asked not to attend their project until a decision has been made.

After an investigation into the allegation, if the Volunteer Coordinator has reasonable grounds, the Volunteer Coordinator should meet with the volunteer as soon as possible to outline the reasons for concern and explain that their volunteer will be asked to permanently leave as a volunteer. There would be written confirmation of this.

The decision to end a volunteer's involvement will always be at the discretion of the relevant Museum's Manager or equivalent.

#### Examples of serious misconduct:

- Breach of health and safety practice, which will put volunteers, staff and visitors at risk
- Discrimination or harassment on the grounds of sex, gender identity, marital status, sexual orientation, race, religion, politics, colour, nationality, disability, culture, age or social background
- Theft of money, property, special collections and objects
- Physical assault, violence and aggression to volunteers, members of staff and visitors
- Malicious damage to property including objects and special collections
- Volunteering under the influence of alcohol, solvents or non-prescribed drugs

- Behaviour which will be derogatory to the museums

The above list is not comprehensive but is provided to indicate the level of seriousness of misconduct which may lead to a volunteer being asked to leave.

## 12. Information and Data Protection

Records are kept for all our volunteers. These records include contact details for the volunteer and their emergency contact, a record of the projects worked on, training undertaken, areas of interest, and the hours volunteered on a project.

The host organisation for MPR volunteer information is The MERL (The University of Reading).

Data collection and processing is in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation 2016, and the Data Protection Act 2018, and in line with our Privacy Policy which is available to view on our website: <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/about-us/merl-privacy-policy/>

Online records for all MERL and Reading Museum volunteers are kept on the online volunteering system Better Impact, whose [privacy policy](#) complies with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016, and the Data Protection Act 2018 and the University of Reading's Data Protection and Freedom of Information policies.

Any hard copy personal data is held securely either at Reading Museum or The MERL in a locked filing cabinet or locked cupboard.

Any digital documents containing personal information are held on a password-protected computer database, and/ or the volunteering platform, and will not be shared with third parties, in line with the University of Reading's Data Protection and GDPR guidelines.

Volunteers' data is also used collectively for management reports. Personal information on individual volunteers is not shared with any external bodies or other departments outside of the MPR without prior permission.

To maintain up to date records, volunteers should amend any changes to personal details, address or contact details on the [Better Impact platform My Profile section](#) or notify the Volunteer Coordinator of changes required.

Volunteers have the right to object to the use of their data for any of the above purposes.

Relevant volunteers will be advised of the need for confidentiality where they have access to sensitive information. This includes any information about any individual or organisation working with the partner museums.

## 13. Copyright

Volunteers will be expected to donate any original copyright works they produce while volunteering. Wherever practicable (e.g. blog articles, publications), we will acknowledge the volunteer's authorship. If the volunteer wishes to use work in another context, this will usually be possible, but it's best to check.



Volunteers may be asked to sign a copyright agreement for certain projects, for example devising and leading guided tours.

#### 14. Insurance

All volunteers undertaking voluntary roles approved and authorised by Reading Museum are covered by Reading Borough Council's insurance policy.

All volunteers undertaking voluntary roles approved and authorised by The MERL are covered by the University of Reading's insurance policy.

It is the responsibility of individuals to look after their personal possessions. These are only covered by the insurance policy if damage was caused by the negligence of the relevant organisation.

It is the responsibility of the volunteer to inform their motor insurance company if they are using their car for volunteering purposes. The majority of insurance companies will extend 'Social, Domestic and Pleasure' car insurance to include business use at no cost, if this is requested at the time of annual renewal.

#### 15. References

We can provide references for volunteers who have taken part in the MPR Volunteering Programme for eight sessions or more. The reference will either be provided by the Volunteer Coordinator, or from the member of staff who supervised the volunteer.

The volunteer should contact their Supervisor or Volunteer Coordinator before naming them as referees, to check that the staff member is still working for the organisation.

#### 16. Review of volunteering policy

This volunteer policy is reviewed annually, to ensure it is in keeping with current changes within the partner organisations and voluntary sector.

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