



National
Trust

Researching with Volunteers

Guidance for Academic Partners



Researching with Volunteers: Guidance for Academic Partners

A photograph showing three people, two women and one man, leaning over a wooden table in a room with a fireplace. They appear to be examining a large document or book on the table. The room has a classic, historical feel with framed pictures on the wall.

Volunteers in action at Nostell

About this Guidance

The National Trust relies on volunteers: they are crucial to keeping the places the organisation looks after open to visitors, and they care deeply about the history and significance of these places. The Trust has hundreds of volunteers who actively research in a variety of areas, including bio-surveying, oral history research, genealogical research and research into gardens and collections. Engaging with these volunteers will benefit academics who are working in collaboration with the National Trust.

The experience of research-active volunteers varies: some might be retired academics with an extensive research and publication record, while others might be enthusiastic beginners who had never been to an archive before they started volunteering at the Trust. All of these volunteers will have a contribution to make at some point of the research process: from planning and development through to interpretation and delivery to the public. In this guide you'll find information on volunteers, practical steps to effective collaborative working, a detailed case study of a successful collaboration and hints and tips on working with volunteers.

A photograph of a woman with glasses and a dark jacket standing behind a wooden table. She is smiling and talking to a family consisting of a woman in a purple jacket, a young girl in a pink and blue jacket, and a young boy in a blue jacket. They are in a room with a wooden door and a bookshelf in the background.

Volunteer room guide chatting to visitors, Dunham Massey

Why work with volunteers?

Volunteer guides are usually the first point of contact for visitors to National Trust sites and properties. Volunteers are often the people who answer visitors' questions and offer information about the current programme. This means that if academic research has underpinned the visitor programme, volunteers will need to feel confident enough about the research to talk about it with knowledge and enthusiasm.

During the research process many volunteers will also have valuable contributions to make that will enhance academics' knowledge and understanding about the site, its history and its significance. In addition to being rewarding and enjoyable experiences, academics also often cite collaborations with National Trust volunteers as evidence of impact and engagement in Impact Case Studies. This is particularly true when academic research has changed the way that volunteers engage with the public, or when training and development sessions are offered as part of the collaboration.

While some volunteers won't be interested in becoming involved with research or collaborative work, many will. In setting up a new collaboration it's important that any research-active volunteers are aware of the project, and that they are given the opportunity to feed in to the research or interpretation process. The property-based staff you are working with will be in the best position to advise on which volunteers might like to be involved, and how these volunteers could participate. Meeting volunteers will give you an opportunity to hear about the research that has already been done onsite, and will engage the volunteers with the project so that they feel confident, informed and enthusiastic about talking about new research and interpretation with our visitors.

Working with Volunteers Case Study: Lyme and the Second World War

At Lyme, the property staff and research volunteers are working on a Joint Research Project with Dr David Clampin from Liverpool John Moores University to better understand Lyme's role as a War Nursery in the Second World War. The volunteers have been researching the experiences of children who were evacuated to Lyme during the Blitz, and have conducted interviews with surviving evacuees, while Dr Clampin's research on the Home Front during the Second World War has put Lyme's wartime history story into its wider historical context.



Evacuees were sent to Lyme from London during the Blitz

“Orientating research around a specific site, and working alongside the volunteers associated with that site, provides an additional layer of engagement. Not only does connecting with a physical space inform and enhance the research process, but the volunteers also have a real passion for their site, which can help to bring inanimate archival material to life. Further, they have unrivalled and intimate knowledge, which they willingly share, freeing my time to concentrate on the specifics and nuances that come from a more purely “academic” approach.



Volunteers being based locally is also advantageous, with connections and a sense of integrity that allow them to tease out information in the locale in a way that a more “lofty” or distant academic might not be able to do. Overall, working alongside volunteers grounds and connects academic research, resulting in a more empathetic and personal perspective”.

Dr David Clampin,
Liverpool John Moores University

Working with Volunteers Case Study:

What happened at Lyme – step by step

1. The staff team at Lyme **identified a research need**. They knew that the property had been used as a War Nursery during the Second World War, but had not yet examined fully the primary source material in Lyme's own archives or elsewhere, or put this part of Lyme's history into a wider context.
2. Having decided to research this part of the history of Lyme and approached an academic with similar research interests, the team **gauged volunteer interest** by inviting all volunteers to an initial briefing meeting. At this meeting the Lyme staff gave a summary of what was already known about this part of the property's history and Dr Clampin introduced himself and his research specialism.
3. The volunteers were asked what research topics needed to be explored in order to better understand the history Lyme during the Second World War. Based on their discussions between themselves and with Dr Clampin, the volunteers were **organised into work streams** that focused on a specific element of the wartime history of Lyme. These included the evacuees, the Home Guard, changes to the house and estate during the war, and the Women's Voluntary Service at Lyme.
4. To stay on track, the Lyme team **nominated a research coordinator** from the volunteer cohort. This coordinator collected the findings of the other volunteers. The staff team scheduled regular catch ups with the coordinator, as well as update meetings for the rest of the volunteers and Dr Clampin every other month. These meetings have been an opportunity to share new findings and to offer any research training from Dr Clampin and National Trust staff that the volunteers have asked for throughout the process.
5. The staff team at Lyme has also been meeting separately with Dr Clampin throughout the process to discuss **evaluating the partnership** and collecting evidence of impact and engagement for the university. See the guide on Documents and Agreements for more information.

“Working as the volunteer coordinator has enabled me to use my former library research skills, along with helping to guide and inspire our enthusiastic and very knowledgeable team of researchers. Each of us has taken a different aspect and for me it has been absolute joy to interview local people, and record their memories. The academic guidance we have received has enabled us to keep focussed when the task has seemed daunting at times. Would I do it again? Absolutely!”

Chris Mellor

Volunteer research coordinator, Lyme



Working with Volunteers: Hints and Tips

- 1. Establish what volunteers have already done.** In many cases, the volunteers at a particular site or property will have been working in any archives associated with the property and its collections for years, and will have an in-depth knowledge of people and places. They may have written a talk or overview about a topic that you are interested in, or they may have important information that will save you time and help your work. Ask to meet any research-active volunteers early on so you can identify any overlaps in your research interests.
- 2. Include volunteers in the process as early as possible.** Volunteers will be the main point of contact between visitors and any exhibition or event that comes from your research project. In order to engage the volunteers in the research and its outputs – whether or not they will be involved in any research themselves – it’s important that they feel informed, comfortable and included. This will also mean that they will be able to better and more enthusiastically engage the public. Running update sessions throughout the collaboration is an effective way to include volunteers in the planning and development of research. In these meetings you can let the volunteers know what you’ve discovered and to ask for any input and feedback, so that they feel empowered to deliver the results. This is also an element of collaborative working that can go into Impact Case Studies as evidence of academic research having an impact on the professional development of staff and volunteers.

Working with Volunteers: Hints and Tips

- 3. Keep a record of how you have worked with volunteers.** For the purposes of capturing evidence of the impact of your research on the National Trust, it will be useful to keep a full record of all meetings and interactions you have with volunteers. This is particularly relevant when you are sharing new research that could change and develop the way volunteers are able to engage the public with a programme – for instance, when you update volunteers on new research that reveals a part of the history of the site that was not previously known. Keeping a record of the impact you have had on volunteers will help with the evaluation of your collaboration with the National Trust, and can include reports, interviews or reports on focus groups that are submitted as evidence of impact for a REF Impact Case Study.
- 4. Consider working with volunteers as an opportunity to share learning.** Because they have often been researching a particular place for a long time, volunteers can feel a sense of ownership of the subject(s) of their research. While the majority of volunteers will be excited to work with academics, it's important that external researchers acknowledge that they might not be the first person to have been interested in the topic or started some in-depth research, and that the on-site research volunteers may well have valuable and detailed knowledge that could make a significant contribution to the project. Avoid branding meetings with volunteers as 'training' in the first instance – although the volunteers may well request some specific training later on in the research process – and instead treat your first meeting as an opportunity to gauge what the volunteers have already found out and how your research might fit in to develop what is already known. If possible, you should aim to meet the volunteers throughout the research process to report on your progress and ask for feedback any research-based theories you have.

Working with Volunteers: Hints and Tips

- 5. Cite the volunteers in outputs from the collaboration.** Everybody likes to get credit for their involvement in a research project, so do make sure you acknowledge any volunteers who have made a significant contribution to the outputs of the research. Citing volunteers by name in your acknowledgements as sources of information or as co-authors will reflect the collaborative nature of the research you've done.



“The best thing about volunteer research is that it’s collaborative – it’s an amazing way of doing research. When you get people with similar interests and complementary skills together (especially when they are similarly nerdy about a topic...), it builds the story and you end up with really useful research about the family and place that is based in its historical context”.

Kath Rigby
Research volunteer at Dunham Massey

Resources for Working with Volunteers

The volunteers at every place that the National Trust looks after will have an on-site line manager. Depending on the size and type of the site this may be a dedicated Volunteer Lead. Alternatively, managing volunteers could be part of the role of the House and Collections Manager, Lead Ranger, or Operations Manager. It’s a good idea to find out who manages the volunteers at the place you’re working with as they’ll be able to advise on volunteer involvement in the project.

More information about volunteers at the National Trust and the work they do can be found here: <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/volunteer>.