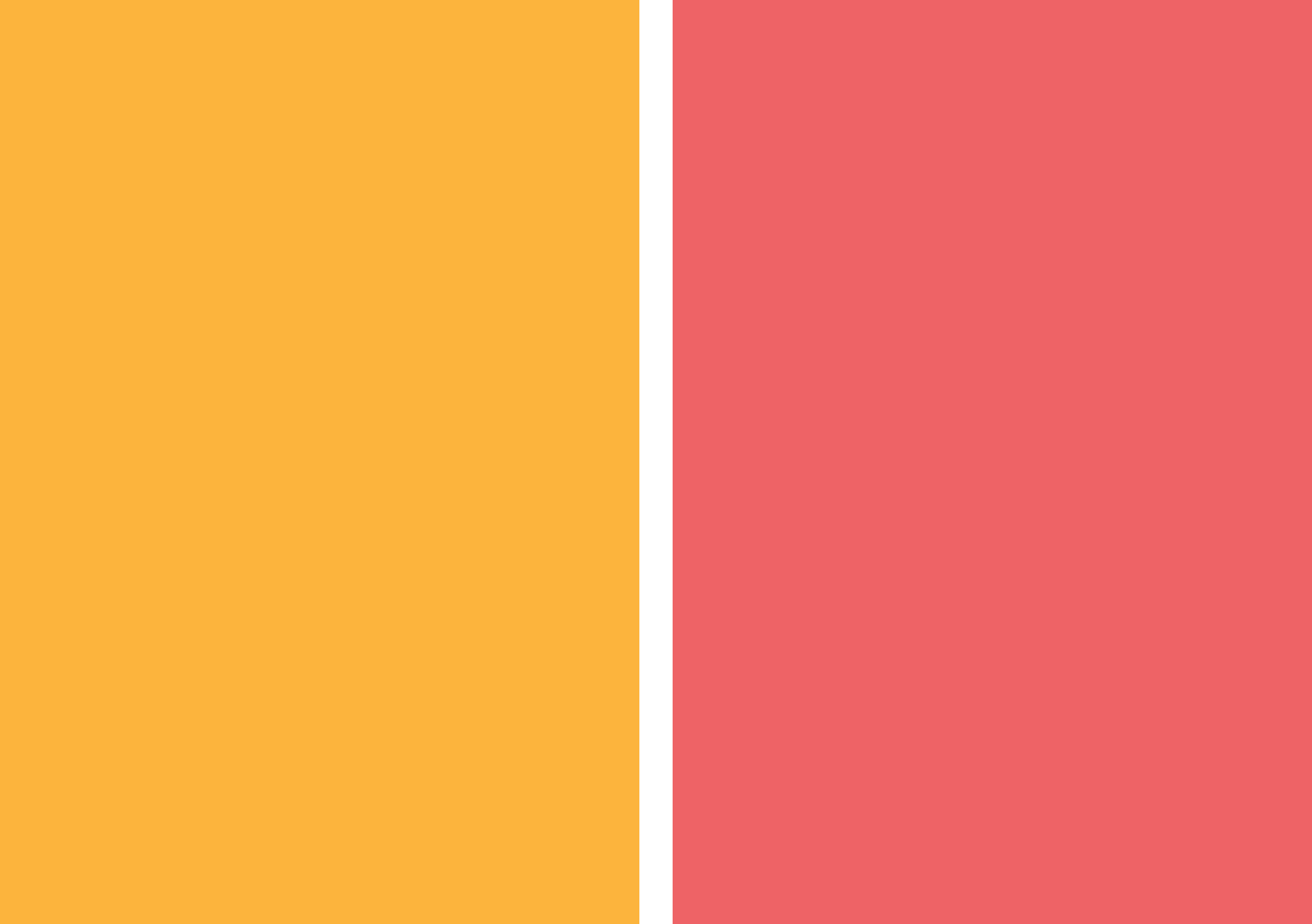


Volunteer Voices

Industry Stakeholders
Report, April 2022





Volunteer Voices

Industry Stakeholders Report

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01 Foreword

This report gathers together observations and learning from our collaborative Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project Volunteer Voices – a pilot training programme for heritage volunteers – that ran from January to December 2021. Our aim in this report is to provide a useful record of our project activity and to offer practical recommendations for future working. These recommendations have relevance to organisations commissioning and managing contemporary art programmes at heritage places, and to staff with responsibilities for the management, training, and development of heritage volunteers.

Following on from the *Mapping Contemporary Art In the Heritage Experience* (MCAHE) research project in 2017-20, Volunteer Voices gave heritage volunteers a much needed forum to discuss their views on contemporary art, and why and how it might contribute to, and reflect upon, the presentation and re-presentation of British history within our heritage places.

The value that heritage volunteers bring these places cannot be overstated. Enthusiastic, knowledgeable, and with considerable skills, these individuals bring history alive for the national and international visitors who visit our impressive collection of heritage sites. As contemporary art in heritage programming increases, and more artists are invited to respond to our history, it is heritage volunteers who largely have the task of presenting the artist's work to visitors. Whilst positioned at the forefront of visitor interaction with these artworks, volunteers often feel underprepared for this interpretive role and are not always sure themselves why the art is there.

The Volunteer Voices programme demonstrated that when heritage volunteers are given an opportunity to be directly involved in conversations with artists, and with arts programmers within their organisations, a real sense of understanding comes to the fore and an ambassadorial network of supportive, informed, and engaged individuals is created. This benefits visitors, artists, and curators alike and has a strong ripple effect throughout the participating organisation.

01 Foreword

Both Arts&Heritage and Newcastle University are actively engaged in the advancement of contemporary art programming outside of the formal gallery space, and work closely with the heritage and arts sectors. To have worked with a group of volunteers who committed their time, enthusiasm and experience to this project has been a privilege and we thank all those individuals who took part, alongside the participating organisations, National Trust, English Heritage, Durham Cathedral, and Ushaw Historic House, Chapels, and Gardens. We are grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for the award that made Volunteer Voices possible. The learning from this project shows that in bringing volunteers into dialogue with arts programmers and with exhibiting artists to generate a joint understanding of how contemporary art contributes positively to our extraordinary heritage places, the rewards are substantial.

Stephanie Allen
Professor Andrew Burton

Executive Director, Arts&Heritage
Newcastle University



02 Key Findings

Communication

- To communicate productively and positively with visitors about the artworks they might encounter, heritage volunteers need to understand why their heritage organisation is investing in contemporary art practice, why a particular artist has been chosen, and what the artist's own intentions are for the artwork.
- Active engagement with contemporary art projects from an early stage enriches volunteer understanding and appreciation, leading to better quality dialogue between volunteers and visitors, and through that, a more satisfying and rewarding visitor experience.
- At a minimum, volunteers need to be kept informed about future art projects commissioned for or being hosted by their heritage site, including being given opportunities to meet with, and ask their own questions of the artists concerned.

Valuing volunteers

- Volunteers' own knowledge about the site and its histories can provide a rich resource for artists when they are developing their ideas. Providing artists with access to volunteers at an early stage of the artwork development process is a real positive.
- Providing opportunities for volunteers to visit artists in their studios, as well as to attend special exhibition previews and artists' talks, demonstrates an organisation's commitment to the contribution made by volunteers.
- Volunteers have a considerable array of practical and communication skills that can be utilised by artists in the development and making of their work. Having access to an audit of volunteer skills held at a property would provide artists with a key resource.

Deeper engagement

- Volunteers can contribute to the development of the artist's commission brief. This creates a greater sense of being included in the organisation's plans for cultural programming and generates a sense of ownership in a contemporary art project.
- Volunteers can become active members of the shortlisting and selection process. Their involvement engenders a greater understanding of the artist's practice and the reasons why successful artists are selected.
- Through active inclusion in the development of an artwork or wider creative programme, volunteers become ambassadors for it. They can present it to their fellow volunteers, answering questions that other volunteers may have about the artist and the artwork, and generating a sense of collective ownership.



03 Introduction

Volunteer Voices was developed from the findings of the *Mapping Contemporary Art in the Heritage Experience* (MCAHE) research project (2017-20). Led by a team of researchers based at Newcastle University and Leeds University, MCAHE critically examined the role, value, and practice of visual art commissioning within the heritage sector, mapping the current landscape and exploring the impact of this activity on its producers and audiences. Public outputs from the project included six new site-specific temporary artworks commissioned for four heritage properties in North East England in 2018-19, a public exhibition at Newcastle's Hatton Gallery and a major international conference held at Newcastle University in 2019.

As well as exploring the many positives of art commissioning in heritage sites, MCAHE also examined how and why the process of commissioning an artist and presenting contemporary artworks in these places can become unstuck or provoke tensions. One contributing factor is the way that heritage organisations' investment in contemporary art projects is often undermined through poor quality, or non-existing, interpretation. While some artists may be resistant to providing textual interpretation for their work, our research found that within a heritage setting and especially in addressing visitors who may not be familiar with contemporary art practice, commissioned artworks rarely succeed in positively engaging audiences if they are left to 'speak for themselves', without any form of written or verbal introduction.

Our experience with MCAHE showed us that heritage volunteers are a key but so far underexploited resource in advocating for and interpreting the many contemporary artworks and commissions that are being presented at heritage sites. While some individuals may engage enthusiastically with visitors on this subject, with no training offered and little organisational planning around ongoing artwork interpretation, most volunteers will feel unconfident and ill-equipped to take on this important role.

Volunteers are not typically offered any support to help them interpret contemporary artworks or provided with much background information about the artworks or the artists concerned. Nor is the heritage organisation's overall rationale for commissioning contemporary art for heritage places

well understood by volunteers. While heritage organisations rely heavily on volunteers to provide high quality and informative experiences for their visitors, pointing visitors to interesting features and the sometimes hidden historical narratives associated with their properties, in many cases a meaningful discussion about contemporary artworks is missed. In failing to prepare volunteers for, or capitalise on, such opportunities the full value of investment in an art project (time, money, organisational input and the creative energy of the artist) may not be properly realised.

Building on these findings from MCAHE, our aim with Volunteer Voices was therefore to design and pilot a new model for heritage volunteer training that would focus specifically on giving volunteers a better understanding of contemporary art in heritage practice and through that, building their ability and confidence to speak about contemporary artworks to their visitors – enriching the overall visitor experience, but importantly also the satisfaction gained from their own volunteering.

The Volunteer Voices project thus had five objectives:

- To address a gap in current heritage volunteer training
- To build volunteers' confidence in presenting contemporary artworks to visitors
- To design, develop and test out a set of training activities and resources
- To initiate a new network of volunteer contemporary art ambassadors
- To create a model for future volunteer training within the heritage sector.

Funders and Partners

Volunteer Voices was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through a one-year Follow-On for Impact and Engagement Award. Led by a project team based in the School of Arts and Cultures at Newcastle University (Andrew Burton, Judith King, Rebecca Farley and Kiki Claxton) Volunteer Voices was delivered in partnership with Arts&Heritage, (the Arts Council England-funded national Sector Support Organisation for contemporary art in heritage and museums), the Heritage Volunteering Group (HVG), and with staff, volunteers and Volunteer Managers working with National Trust, English Heritage, and with two independent heritage properties in North East England.

04 The Pilot Training Programme

Project Participants

Our cohort of heritage volunteers taking part in the pilot Volunteer Voices training programme were drawn from six very different north-east heritage sites: Durham Cathedral; Belsay Hall, Castle and Gardens (English Heritage); Cherryburn, Gibside and Hadrian's Wall (all owned by National Trust); and Ushaw Historic House, Chapels, and Gardens (near Durham City).



Participant Recruitment

At the start of the project, in January 2021, a participant call out was prepared by the Newcastle University project team and circulated to volunteers via the Volunteer Managers at each participating property. Our aim was to recruit a group of around sixteen volunteers to work with us across the pilot programme (ideally, four volunteers from each partner organisation) who would represent a mix of interests and views on contemporary art including, importantly, those who might be sceptical about contemporary art or its relevance to the heritage sector. In our introductory information we stated that we were looking to work with people who were: 'curious' and who wanted to enhance their knowledge of how contemporary artists work; who were 'open to ideas'; and who would be committed to taking part in the full workshop programme, including studio and site visits, and to undertaking some 'homework' between the sessions.

Interested volunteers were invited to find out more about the project and to meet the team (and each other) at an informal Zoom drop-in session hosted by the University team. If still interested in being involved, volunteers were then asked to complete and return a short 'Expression of Interest' form, stating their interests in wanting to take part and giving some background on their own experience of contemporary art at heritage sites.

Following a shortlisting process and further conversations with the Volunteer Managers, sixteen volunteers were recruited to work with us to develop our pilot programme: three volunteers each from Gibside, Hadrian's Wall, Belsay and Ushaw, and four from Durham Cathedral. Reflecting volunteer profiles evidenced across the heritage sector, all our participants were in the older adult age group. Many were recently retired. Four people from this initial group subsequently chose to withdraw from the project: one because of the pressure of other volunteering roles; others because they found they were unable to attend on some of the dates; or due to technical issues joining the first two workshops, both of which were conducted via Zoom because of Covid19 restrictions.

“It’s been an eye-opener. I’ve never really connected heritage with contemporary art before” Volunteer

Programme Structure

The pilot training programme was structured around seven participatory workshops, artists' studio visits and site visits taking place over four months, April – July 2021.

Workshop 1: 'Introduction to contemporary art in heritage practice'

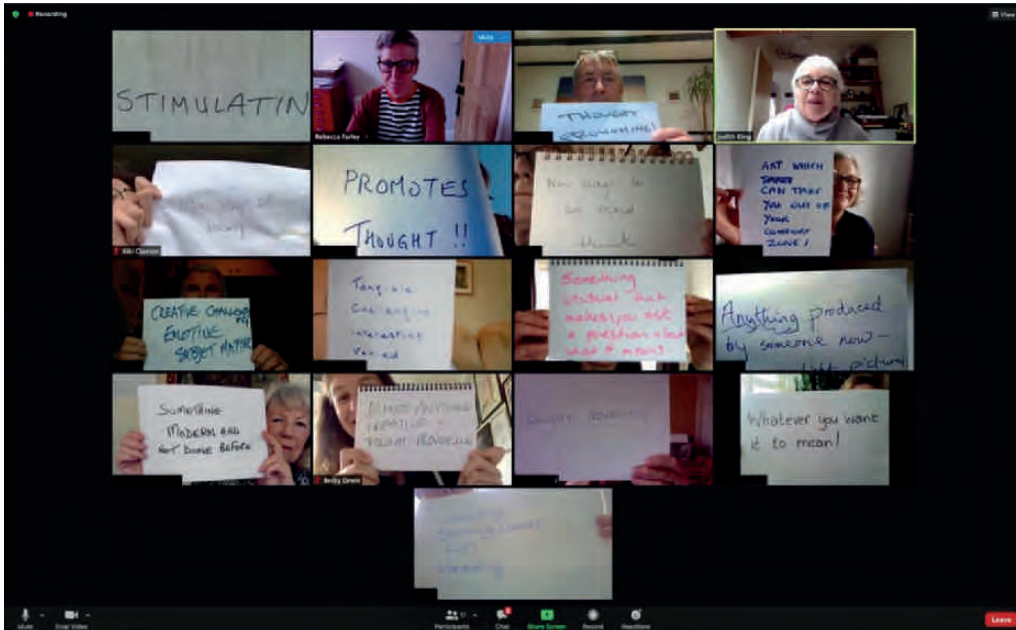
(Via Zoom)

Led by members of the NU project team this first session was designed to introduce volunteers to the different approaches taken by contemporary artists in making artworks for heritage places, including discussion of some basic contemporary art terms e.g. a 'commission', 'residency', a 'performance' or 'installation'. To demonstrate these different approaches, a wide range of project examples were presented and explored. The group then split into break-out rooms where participants were invited to share their own experiences of encountering contemporary art in heritage and to explore some of the opportunities or issues that they envisaged in talking to their own visitors about such activities.

Workshop 2: 'Contemporary art in heritage – exploring issues and experiences'

(Via Zoom)

Building on the opening discussions, this second session looked in detail at three case study art in heritage projects, including presentations and Q&A with the curators, commissioners and one of the artists involved in our MCAHE commissions, Fiona Curran. A range of common issues were considered and examined: from artists' and organisations' expectations, to volunteer responsibilities, and the challenges of addressing negative audience reaction.



Workshop 3: 'Meeting the artists' (1)

(Virtual studio visits via Zoom)

Originally planned as in-person visits, but switched to online delivery, the aim of this session was to hear from artists themselves about how and why they want to make work for heritage places. Our volunteers met three artists during this workshop, each of whom had previously worked on commissions managed by Arts&Heritage: Faye Claridge, Nadim Chaudry, and two members of the artist collective Brass Art. Each artist gave a presentation on their practice before joining together as a panel to answer volunteers' questions. An online resource with links to the artists' websites and selected projects was provided in advance of the workshop to familiarise volunteers with the different practices we would be exploring and to help them to formulate their own questions for the presenting artists.

**“It’s been a surprise – but an interesting one!
Not what I was expecting!” Volunteer**

Screenshot from Workshop 2 showing participants' responses to the question:

Workshop 4: 'Talking to visitors about contemporary art'

This workshop was hosted by BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead. It was co-delivered by BALTIC's Head of Visitor Experience and a member of the BALTIC Crew – the gallery's front of house and live interpretation team. This session was also attended by some of our property Volunteer Managers. It explored BALTIC Crew's approach to talking to visitors about the BALTIC exhibitions, key enablers being the time Crew members were given to do their own research on the artists and the artworks exhibited, and the peer support provided in sharing visitors' questions and feeding back on any difficult issues raised. Attending artist or curator talks and holding a Crew-led walk-through of the exhibition pre-opening was an important part of their preparation. There is no 'set script' for talking about an exhibition at BALTIC – instead the focus is on facilitating explorative visitor conversations around the artworks presented: an approach that our heritage volunteers were encouraged to adopt.



Workshop 5: 'Meeting the artists' (2)

Following on from our previous virtual 'meet the artists' workshop, this session gave our volunteers the opportunity to meet two artists, Wolfgang Weileder and Irene Brown, in their personal studio spaces at Newcastle University and also to take part in an interactive workshop led by socially-engaged artist Lady Kitt. Each artist explained to the volunteers why they found working in heritage sites so interesting and how they researched and made work in response to these places. Visiting the artists in their workspaces, seeing artworks in progress, and hearing directly from the artists about their very different approaches to heritage-based practice, this session had a strong and positive impact on our volunteer cohort. It was described by at least one of our participants as a real 'eye-opener' – a session that brought the whole purpose of making contemporary art in heritage places 'to life'.



“It’s making me think much more about the ideas behind the art” Volunteer

Workshop 6: Site visit to *In Praise of Makers* at Colne Valley Museum

For this full day session we took our Volunteer Voices participants on a day trip to visit a new art commission *In Praise of Makers* by artist Ed Kluz, being launched at the small volunteer-run Colne Valley Museum – an industrial heritage and social history museum on the outskirts of Huddersfield. Hosted by the museum's Chair of Trustees (and well-fortified with tea and delicious home-made cakes!) our participants had the opportunity to learn about the building's history and to tour the museum collection and its fascinating working exhibits in the company of museum volunteers. Small group sessions in the afternoon gave our volunteers the opportunity to talk directly with Ed about his inspiration for the commission and the local craft-based collaborations that were involved in creating the art installation.



Workshop 7: Volunteer Voices wrap-up discussion

In this final workshop we asked our participants to reflect on their experiences of the pilot training and to contribute their ideas about how the programme could be developed for future heritage volunteers. This interactive session was structured around a series of round table conversations and comments walls. During this session we revisited discussion on the reasons why heritage organizations are engaging with contemporary artists and gathered feedback on the value and effectiveness of our various pilot activities. We then asked our participants to make suggestions about how they might share their learning from the training programme with fellow volunteers at their heritage places, and to outline any additional support, going forward, that they might need to help them do this. Volunteers' suggestions for this are discussed in the Sounding Back section below.



Other Volunteer Voices activity

In addition to the workshop sessions outlined above, and to stimulate further social interaction and art in heritage discovery, we also organised a series of voluntary visits to new contemporary art installations being presented over the summer months at three north east National Trust properties. These were: Phoebe Connolly's, *Birds, Beasties and Bewick* at Cherryburn; Lindsay Mendick and Dominic Watson's *Waasa* at Washington Old Hall; and Heinrich and Palmer's *Limelight* at Lindisfarne Castle. Each visit provided a very different experience for the volunteers. Heinrich and Palmer's digital installation at Lindisfarne presented an ethereal and immersive encounter. *Birds Beasties and Bewick* made direct reference to the work of eighteenth century printmaker Thomas Bewick through intricate glass engraving, while *Wassa* animated a vast empty room in Washington Old Hall, presenting a ceramic banquet of folklore and decay.

Resource hub

To facilitate and support the Volunteer Voices project a dedicated pilot resource hub was set up on the Arts&Heritage website. A password protected page led our participants to Zoom session recordings, PowerPoint presentations, homework tasks and online resources that could be used in preparation for and as follow-up after the various workshop sessions and visits. These resources proved popular with our volunteer group with many participants using the links we provided to artists' projects and websites to research and formulate their own questions and debating points for our workshop discussions and the studio visits.

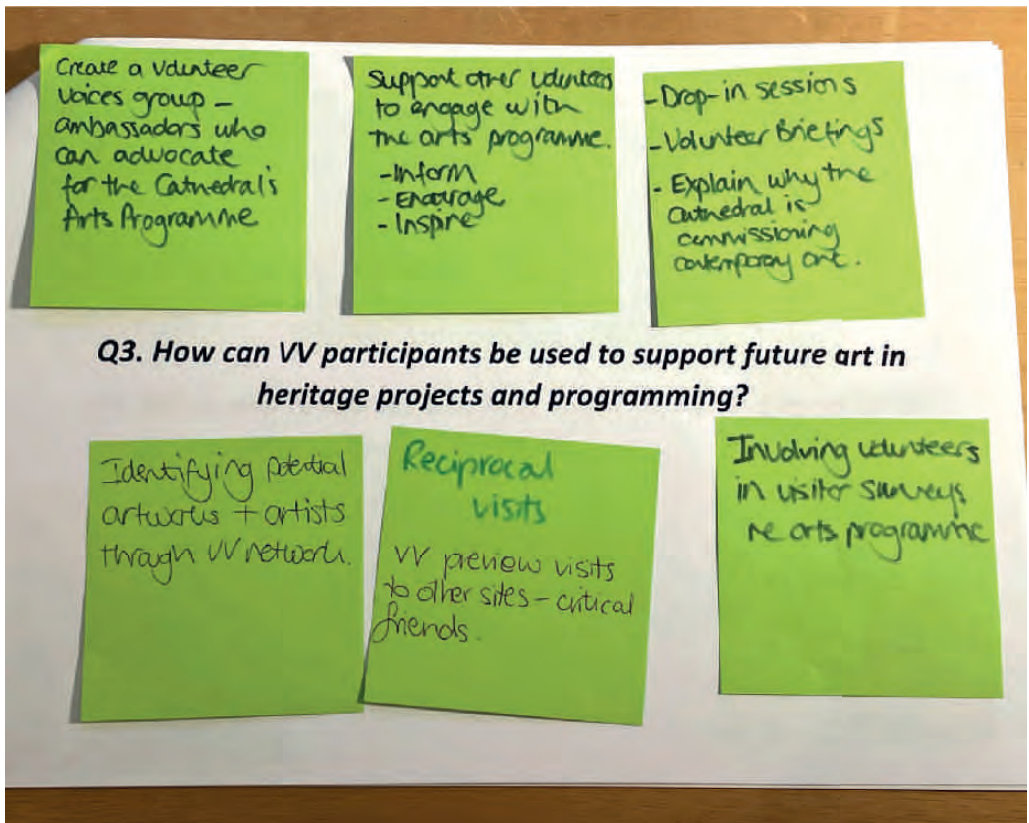
**“Challenging and enlightening.
It’s really opened us up.”** Volunteer

05 Sounding Back



In addition to gathering feedback on the programme content and participants' experience of individual workshops (through Zoom 1:1s and online evaluation forms) to conclude the project we ran two in-person 'Sounding Back' sessions to further interrogate our collective learning from the Volunteer Voices pilot and to consider practical ways in which the programme could be taken forward. In the first session, the University Team reported back to the Volunteer Managers and to our heritage partner organisations on the discussions and issues raised by our volunteers at the Wrap-Up Workshop. Each organisation responded to propose ways in which volunteer needs and suggestions might be accommodated or considered within their own future programming and volunteering structures. This then led on to a second 'Soundings' session where we facilitated a set of four property-focused exchanges in which our volunteers fed back directly to their Volunteer Managers and programme leads on their Volunteer Voices experience and their ideas for taking this work forward.

The recommendations and ideas put forward by our participants for improving volunteer involvement in contemporary art presentation at heritage sites coalesced around three broad themes. The first of these themes is better communication. As our various workshop conversations around the institutional reasons for engaging with contemporary art demonstrated, our volunteers were not always conversant with or entirely clear about why their own heritage organisation or property was supporting or considering future involvement in this type of activity. Without such understanding volunteers' confidence and interest in talking to visitors about contemporary artworks at their site and their wider buy-in to the overall contemporary art in heritage offer, could be undermined. While we appreciate the considerable lengths that some artists, curators, and heritage managers do go to in seeking to engage volunteers with arts projects, our participants felt that their organisations needed to invest more staff resources in improving communication with their volunteers on this subject and also more generally in providing better lead-in information on longer-term art programming. Often our volunteers thought that they were at the end of the line for receiving this type of information, with the result that art projects felt sprung upon them rather than actively involving them.



Some of the recommendations suggested by volunteers at the final 'Sounding Back' session. Photo: Rebecca Farley.

Secondly, our volunteer participants felt that heritage organisations could perhaps do better in valuing volunteers' contributions and potential, both in terms of drawing on an individual's prior, or indeed parallel, work experience and skill sets, but also more broadly as an active resource and asset to the organisation. As in our own participant cohort, many heritage volunteers hold deep knowledge about the histories and material collections of the properties where they volunteer. Those taking on visitor-facing roles especially, are often enthusiastic educators – keen to share their own fascination, knowledge, and excitement about their site with the visiting public.

Thirdly, with the new confidence and interest in contemporary art derived from their involvement in the pilot training, our participants were vocal in wanting a deeper engagement with contemporary art projects and programming at their heritage site, seeing this as essential to their future role as on-site contemporary art interpreters. Reflecting on their experiences of Volunteer Voices, getting to meet with commissioned or exhibiting artists prior to the public launch of an art project (and preferably earlier on), having the opportunity to ask their own questions of the artists and to share with them their own knowledge of the site and understandings of the visitor experience, were voiced as a key benefits and future needs. Going further, participants suggested that in future, trained volunteers should be invited to play an active role in the commissioning process, with representation on artist selection panels for individual projects, and joining discussions with artists, property staff and fellow volunteers on appropriate methods for artwork interpretation and visitor engagement.

Beyond the commissioning process itself, our participants suggested several practical ways in which they, and future Volunteer Voices 'graduates', could be more creatively engaged in the presentation of contemporary artworks at their volunteering site:

"We could..."

- organise a workshop or social event with the artist for fellow volunteers to come to
- give a guided tour or talk about the artwork
- lead a walk-through of the installation/exhibition for other site volunteers
- produce an interpretation video introducing the artwork to visitors.

“I’ve loved looking at the various resources and doing the homework” Volunteer

06 Volunteer Voices: Challenges, positives and Change

The challenges

Covid19! In common with problems experienced in wider society, Covid19 lockdowns, requirements for social distancing and mask wearing, and heritage site closures all posed problems for the running of the pilot training programme. In particular, the (pandemic-induced) heavy reliance on online rather than in-person communication, especially at the start of the project, was off-putting for some participants and represented a steep learning curve for many. As a peer-group-focused programme, maintaining social contact within and between sessions was important. Once these became allowed, our in-person site and studio visits proved a vital ingredient in this process.

Volunteers are busy people! Several members of our project cohort undertook volunteer duties at multiple heritage places or in other settings, while others had regular caring responsibilities that they needed to work around their participation in our project. This was especially acute in the school summer holidays.

Project timing and recruitment! With more time available at the start of the project, the recruitment process may have reached a more substantial number and potentially a broader range of heritage volunteers. The University team would have been able to present the project to volunteers on-site so that participants had a more informed idea of the project and what it would entail. However, volunteers at heritage sites rarely get together as one large group so the opportunity to address them directly in this way was difficult, especially during the height of the pandemic. This meant that we had to rely on Volunteer Managers to co-ordinate recruitment of volunteers for the project, potentially limiting the reach of our participant Call Out.

The many positives

Our volunteer participants were very engaged in the project and contributed strongly to discussions both in-person and online. Levels of interaction grew significantly with each workshop. The workshops and visits offered a valuable

social opportunity for participants to exchange their art in heritage experiences and their wider interests and knowledge with other volunteers, including with volunteers at their own heritage property whom they had not met before.

There was genuine enjoyment and enthusiasm for the new information and resources we shared and especially for meeting the artists on Zoom and in their studios. The visit to Colne Valley Museum and hearing from other volunteers and the commissioned artist there was a particularly enjoyable part of the programme. The different artists' thoughts and reflections on why they worked in heritage places was very well retained by the group and featured in many of our subsequent conversations and 'Sounding Back' activity.

Most of our volunteer cohort were keen to extend their engagement with the Volunteer Voices project – sharing their new learning and their individual perspectives on camera as part of our Volunteer Voices films, sending us information and personal feedback on exhibitions they had seen, and pledging their commitment to joining a steering group to guide future development activity. Since the completion of the pilot training, nine of our participants have signed up to take part in a new extension project that will give them direct experience of commissioning an artist.

The change it made

At the start of the pilot training, volunteers were asked to rate their level of knowledge about contemporary art and to score their own sense of confidence in talking to visitors about contemporary artworks that might be commissioned for, or exhibited at, their volunteering site. These responses ranged from 'poor' (5 respondents) to 'fair' (6) to 'fair-good' (1) in terms of knowledge; and from 'not confident' (10 respondents) to 'confident' (1) and 'very confident' (1) in terms of speaking to visitors about contemporary art.

Comparing the personal statements made in their initial 'Expression of Interest' forms with volunteers' feedback gathered in our closing 'Sounding Back' workshops, on film, and in follow-up meetings with the Volunteer Managers, participation in the training programme clearly made our participants feel more confident in their understanding of contemporary art, its contribution to heritage places, and the different forms that such projects and artworks might take. From their experience of talking about contemporary art and, importantly, of meeting with artists, our participants were much more enthused about the positive contribution that contemporary artists can make to heritage places and vitally for the future impact of our project, were much more

committed to the role they could individually play in conveying these values to visitors. In some cases participants had also begun to formulate how they might individually best engage visitors in such conversations:

Jean: My personal approach would be to say: "Do you find it interesting? What does it make you think? How do you feel looking at that? What is your opinion?" And if that leads to a discussion where we can analyse why it's here and what it offers that to me is a positive.

Susan: I like to ask a person how a work of art makes them feel. Or just how a space or an experience makes them feel. Because that is what is special about this place. And people looking closely at the art that is here, enhances the whole experience.

Paul's Story

Paul is a volunteer on Hadrian's Wall where he leads history tours and walks for visitors. He also runs his own professional tour guiding company. At the start of the training programme Paul, among around half of his co-participants in Volunteer Voices, described his knowledge of contemporary art as 'poor': "I had no idea what contemporary art was before I came along. Being part of Volunteer Voices has truly enlightened me about the skill and the imagination that these artists have. And I'm a lot more positive now about promoting contemporary art and really getting other volunteers to have the same mind-set". You can hear Paul speak about his Volunteer Voices experience, and the difference it has made to him, in 'Paul's Story' – one of the four short films we created as a future training resource for volunteers wanting to develop their knowledge and confidence in talking to visitors about contemporary art at their own heritage property.

"It's been a big learning experience – an education in contemporary art. Meeting the artists was amazing and very helpful." Volunteer



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And his name will prove
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For Silver and Gold
Your votes are not
To be bought the
Bread

Never a Cook
in England Cross
Nor never a Piper
in Scotland Blow
Nor never a Harp
in Ireland Play
Till Liberty regains
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07 **Going Forward...**

Since the formal completion of the Volunteer Voices pilot training programme several of our volunteer participants have initiated their own follow up conversations and dialogues with Volunteer Managers at their properties. Our volunteers from Durham Cathedral for example, are actively discussing and exploring ways in which they can be more involved in the Cathedral Arts Programme, perhaps by organising events and workshops for other Cathedral volunteers and creating new visitor resources for artwork interpretation.

Contemporary Art Ambassadors

Empowered and enthused by their own experience of the training programme, our participants came up with several practical ways in which they, and future Volunteer Voices 'graduates', could get more involved in arts activity at their volunteering sites. With peer group support being a central tenet of Volunteer Voices from the start, the project team has been considering how, with support from Arts&Heritage and our partner heritage organisations, we might collectively develop our pilot cohort as a base for growing a new and potentially wider regional or national network of Volunteer Contemporary Art Ambassadors.

Volunteer-led art commissions

Thanks to new Knowledge Exchange funding awarded from Newcastle University, between January and July 2022 members of the Volunteer Voices project team are working with nine heritage volunteers drawn from our pilot cohort to work on a new extension project that will support participants to lead on the commissioning of a series of 'Blue Sky Artist Ideas' for four North East heritage places. Building on participants' learning from Volunteer Voices, the purpose of this new activity is to give heritage volunteers a practical experience of contemporary art commissioning. It will support them through the various stages of the commission process from developing and writing an artists' brief, to final artist selection, resulting in four 'Artist Ideas' being presented as an online exhibition. To allow broad public access and profile across the sector, these new volunteer-commissioned 'virtual' artworks will be publicly launched and presented on a special section of the Arts&Heritage website in summer 2022.

Arts&Heritage future delivery

Funded as an AHRC Follow On activity it was always intended that Volunteer Voices would be set up and delivered as a one-year pilot project, with a commitment from Arts&Heritage (subject to its continuing Sector Support Organisation status and funding) to develop learning from Volunteer Voices into a model for future training, support, and resource provision for volunteers at heritage places which engage, or are intending to engage in the future, with contemporary art and artists. The pilot programme has been a great success in this regard. By giving heritage volunteers the opportunity to understand what has interested the artists and seeded the development of their ideas and the resulting artworks, Volunteer Voices has established a group of volunteers who are now informed, and enthusiastic about, contemporary art being presented at their heritage properties, now and in the future. The value of the volunteers' own contribution to this project has been considerable. Not only has the dialogue between volunteers, artists and organisational representatives offered a rare opportunity for all to listen and absorb each other's views, it also illustrates the wealth of knowledge and experience that volunteers bring to the table and that can inform an artist's work. Arts&Heritage will take this crucial learning forward into future delivery programmes within the heritage and museums sector.



Small white sign on a table in the foreground, containing text that is partially illegible but appears to be a notice or informational text.

Report written by: Rebecca Farley, Judith King, Andrew Burton and Kiki Claxton.

This work was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Newcastle University, with additional support from our project partners Arts&Heritage, National Trust, English Heritage, Durham Cathedral, Ushaw Historic House, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, and the Heritage Volunteering Group.

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Cover: WASSA by Lindsey Mendick and Dominic Watson at Washington Old Hall, an Arts&Heritage Meeting Point commission, 2021. Photo: Jonathan Turner.
Design: Jo Deans

