



**Museums
Galleries
Scotland**

Supporting Scotland's Museums



CASE STUDY

Wavemakers: Creating a New Volunteering Programme

HMS Unicorn



Workforce

Diversity

Overview

Launched in 1824, HMS Unicorn is an independent museum and the oldest ship in Scotland. It has been in Dundee since 1873 as a training ship and then museum, becoming embedded in the local community. In this case study, Volunteering, Learning, and Engagement Officer Caroline Taylor describes how the HMS Unicorn team developed their Wavemakers volunteering programme to provide meaningful volunteering opportunities to those who need it most.



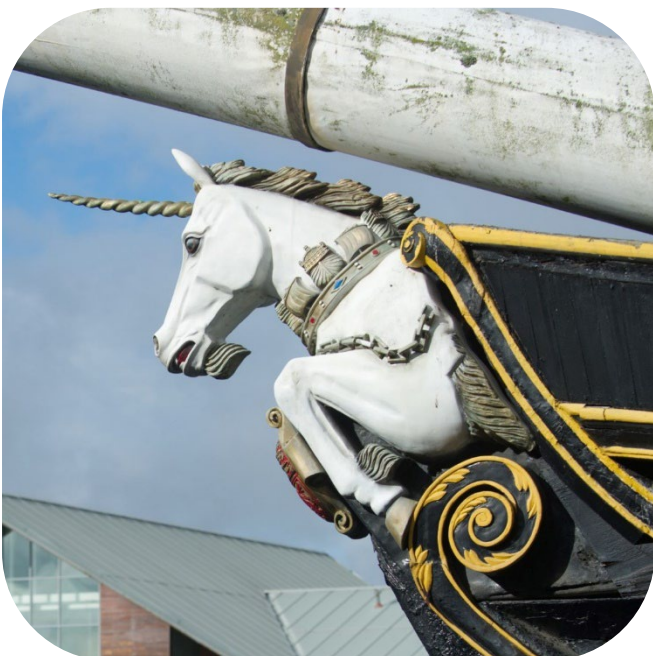
This project meets the aims set out in the [diversity](#) priority area of the strategy for Scotland's museums and galleries.

The project

We worked with local third-sector organisations to help us understand the Dundee context and identify specific hard-to-reach groups that lacked opportunities and required meaningful volunteering:

- Young people aged 16-25,
- People living with a disability,
- People who are long-term unemployed, and
- People living in deprived areas, as identified by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

HMS Unicorn has the advantage that it is perceived by local residents as a non-traditional museum, so we did not face the same barriers that might make people unwilling or reluctant to volunteer at a traditional museum seen as “not for them”. We had the disadvantages of limited budget and our small team of three full-time staff.



"Volunteering here has helped me as a person in many ways. I was just 17 years old when I started and didn't want to go out the house much but coming here has helped to push me out of my comfort zone and my confidence and public speaking skills have improved so much!"

Esther, Volunteer Tour Guide

The Wavemakers principles emerged as a formalised volunteer philosophy, maximising our benefit within our limited means:

1. Partnerships allow us to do better work with more people.
2. Put interpersonal relationships first: volunteers work with people not with heritage.
3. Volunteers are not 'ours'. If they move on to further things, we've done our job.

These principles represented a complete change from the traditional museum volunteer model and approach. It removed the focus from benefit to the museum to benefit to the volunteer. This seemingly small shift had a dramatic effect on our work and helped us to create a volunteering programme that increased our volunteers' confidence, built their skills, and improved their mental health and wellbeing. As a result of Wavemakers, many of our volunteers have moved on to further learning and employment opportunities. We also implemented a new regime of data collection and analysis which allowed us to confidently assert the tangible benefits of Wavemakers.

Successes

- Wavemakers has had a real and positive impact on people's lives. All our volunteers note positive changes in their mental health and wellbeing, improved confidence, and stronger connections to the local community. The majority also feel that they have gained new skills through their volunteering.
- In 2022 40% of our volunteers went on to further employment and 30% went on to further learning.
- We have gained different perspectives on our museum through our volunteering programme by engaging with the audiences we identified. In 2022 49% of our volunteers were aged 16-25, 65% had a disability, 45% were long-term unemployed and 45% lived in deprived areas of Dundee. These different points of view help us to improve and adapt our museum offering so that we remain relevant to our community.

Challenges

- It took time to reframe the volunteering programme and create all the necessary paperwork. Providing tailored support to our volunteers also involves a considerable amount of time. These commitments were particularly difficult because we are such a small team.
- It can be challenging to create an environment that is friendly and fun for our volunteers while also emphasizing the expectations we have of them to reflect HMS Unicorn's status as museum and professional workplace. This requires clear expectations from the beginning about how to communicate with staff, other volunteers and visitors and appropriate behaviour while on board the ship. We have also had to be careful to be consistent in enforcing standards.

Impact

- As a result of Wavemakers we now have a growing group of passionate advocates for HMS Unicorn locally, improving our ability to show why our museum is valuable to the community.
- The positive outcomes that our volunteers have had through Wavemakers highlights the impact that museums can have on society.
- Wavemakers reaches out to those who are often excluded from our services and traditionally have barriers to accessing culture. By prioritizing engagement with these groups we are building community connections and fostering a culture of inclusivity.

Guidance

- Regular reviews with individual volunteers are necessary to check-in with how they are feeling, progressing, and developing. We have also learned that we need to make sure that our volunteers' goals are personalised so that we can celebrate their own progress without comparing themselves to others.
- We needed to be clear about our role and set boundaries with volunteers so they know what we can support them with and when we need to refer them to a specialist organisation – for example, one that specializes in mental health support.
- It is vital for us to work in partnership with relevant local organisations to reach our target audiences and ensure that we maintain the right level of support for our volunteers.
- The most important thing that we have learned is the importance of a safe and friendly environment. This is one of the aspects of volunteering at HMS Unicorn that we get consistently good feedback about from our volunteers. It is crucial for recruiting volunteers and keeping them engaged with us.

Additional information

Visit: [The Wavemakers page on the HMS Unicorn website](#)

Read: [Wavemakers volunteer statistics, July 2021 – July 2022](#)

Contact: [Caroline Taylor, HMS Unicorn's Volunteering, Engagement and Learning Officer](#)

T: 0131 550 4100 | W: museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk | Twitter: @MuseumsGalScot

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