

# Volunteer Inclusion Programme

A Renaissance London publication



Renaissance London is a strategic investment in museum development and public programmes, run in partnership by the London Museums Hub and MLA.

The London Museums Hub is one of nine regional Hubs tasked with developing accessible and innovative museum services in their regions.

**The members of the London Museums Hub are:**

- Museum of London (incl. Museum of London Docklands)
- Geffrye Museum
- Horniman Museum
- London Transport Museum

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## Foreword

The Volunteer Inclusion Programme (VIP) is a very successful Renaissance London project funded through the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council's *Renaissance in the Regions* programme. This report looks at the impact of the first three phases of the programme.

The scheme has brought volunteers from many walks of life in contact with real archaeology and provided them with the opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge, meet new people and gain new and interesting experiences. The impact of this project has also been great for the museum. The accessibility and storage of collections has been improved. Objects which were previously hidden in the stores have been rediscovered and put to use in object handling sessions and featured in publications. In addition, good practice from this scheme has also been shared with other borough museums in London, enabling them to adopt the same standards of collections care and volunteer engagement.

This type of core collections work has tended to be the preserve of a limited number of staff and volunteers. This project shows that with the right support it is possible to open the doors of our stores to a wider range of people, engage them in a very real way with the day to day work of caring and preserving our shared heritage.

We hope that you find this short outline of the outcomes and key learning points from the project useful.

**Fiona Davison, Head of Renaissance London**



# Project summary

## The programme

The programme was run in three phases from September to December 2008, January to April 2009, and May to August 2009. It was based at the *London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre (LAARC)*, at Mortimer Wheeler House – the largest archaeological archive in Europe.

The focus of the scheme was social inclusion and was tasked with recruiting volunteers from diverse backgrounds. The project’s aim was to improve archaeological collections and for volunteers to gain new experiences and develop transferable skills.

The programme was managed by two Hub-funded Archaeological Collections Officers (ACOs), who provided initial and ongoing training for volunteers as well as continual supervision.

### Three work strands were identified at the LAARC for volunteers to work with the collections:

- The first focused on the General (bulk) collections of the Archive. This aspect of the project was ongoing throughout all three phases
- The second focused on the Archive’s Registered (accessioned) collections. This side of the project was concerned with auditing collections and had focused targets
- The third work strand concerned the Archive’s Metal Store. This was a short-term project with a clearly defined end result.

All work strands dealt with archaeological material which had been deposited with the LAARC in the early 1970s and was in a poor state of care. All work strands focused on improving the storage, access and upkeep of the collections.

## Responding to change

During each project phase of the programme, the ACOs were keen to gain feedback from volunteers in order to improve and develop the programme. This was carried out through mid-programme and end-of-programme questionnaires, informal one-to-one discussion and asking for anonymous comments via the volunteer notice board. By responding to feedback, the programme was constantly evolving and seeking to improve volunteers’ experience.

“I would be very interested in volunteering for the London Archaeological Archive and Research Centre on a long-term basis”

# Recruitment

## Where the volunteers came from

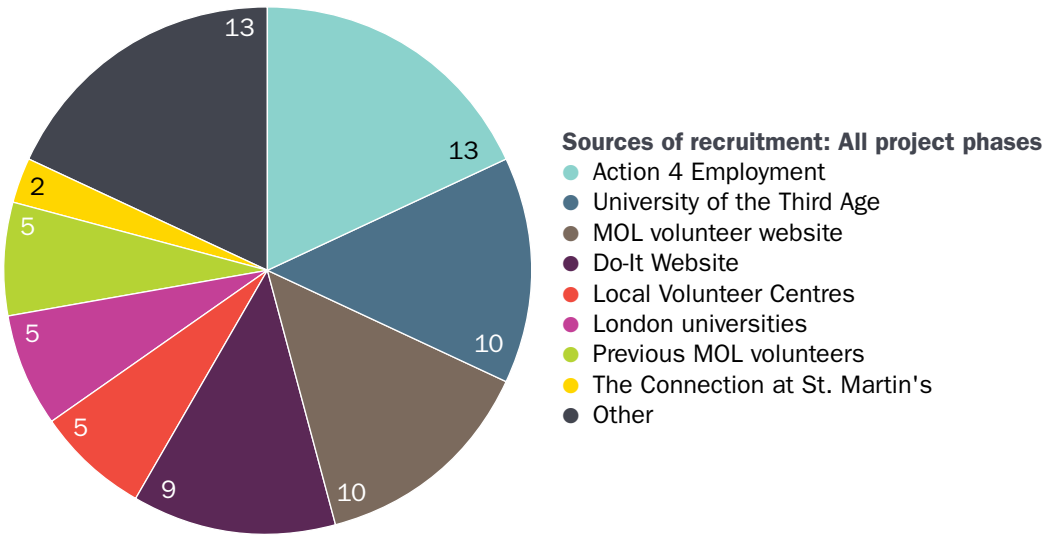
In total, 72 volunteers were recruited from all sections of the community. They were recruited from a range of sources including local volunteer centres, Action 4 Employment in north east London, University of the Third Age, the Do-It website (an online volunteering site), London universities and local homeless organisations. Of the 72 volunteers, three unemployed volunteers withdrew before the end of the scheme as they had found jobs.

Prospective volunteers were invited to an introductory tour of the Archive to learn more about the nature of the project and to see the ‘working’ environment at

the LAARC. This proved a valuable means of recruiting people who were definitely interested and as such more likely to complete the programme.

Following this tour, participants were asked to complete an ‘expression of interest’ form. This form, as well as gaining necessary contact details, asked why they wished to volunteer and for their three preferred days for volunteering. This provided volunteers with an option and also allowed the ACOs to draw up a flexible and diverse timetable for the volunteering week.

Once volunteers were recruited, they were asked to sign a volunteer agreement which helped define a real sense of commitment amongst volunteers.



# Inclusion

## Ethnicity, employment status, age and volunteering experience

A key aim of this project was to engage an inclusive section of the community, bringing together a wide range of people that would be representative of London’s diversity. Volunteer teams included a mix of people, from those who had never been to a museum before, to PhD Archaeology students, long-term unemployed and retired people. Participation in the scheme required no prior knowledge of archaeology and therefore was open to all. In addition, volunteers were not required to undertake a CRB check as they were constantly supervised by the ACOs. This created an uncomplicated and accessible application process.

## Who volunteered?

Across the programme, it was found that the VIP scheme achieved its main objectives of recruiting a diverse and inclusive group of volunteers in terms of gender, employment status, age and volunteering experience. Results show that:

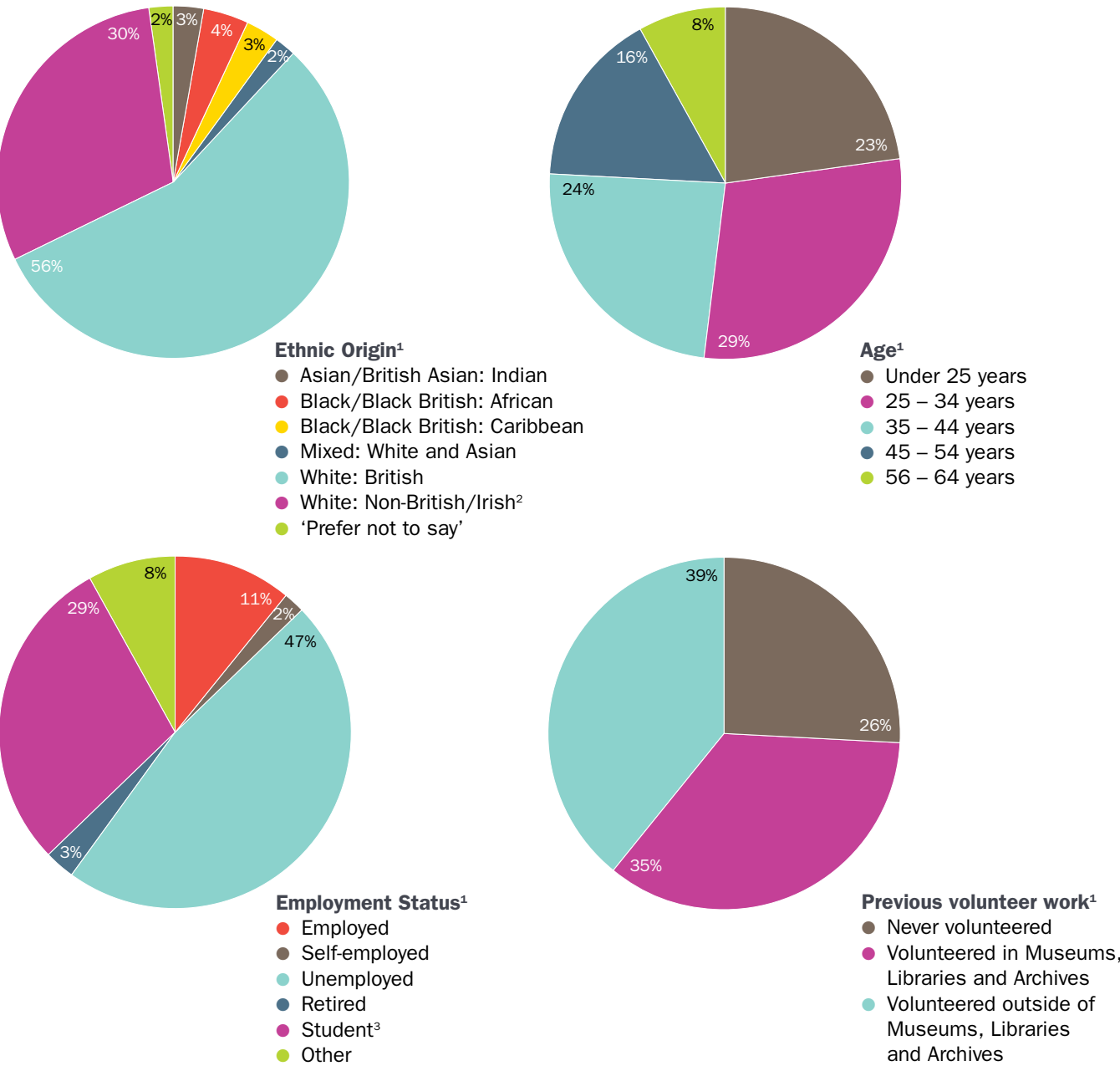
- An equal gender split of volunteers was achieved across the programme
- A significant number of unemployed people were recruited (47%)
- A range of ages was represented, from teenagers to retired people
- For some the programme was their first volunteering experience (26%) and for many it was their first experience of volunteering for a museum or archive (39%).

However, the ethnic background of the volunteers did not fully reflect the diversity of the general population of London. In addition, the latter two stages of the programme opened up recruitment to homeless organisations but only two people were recruited.

## Lessons learnt

Whilst the programme was successful at reaching people of a non-British, white ethnic origin and people for whom English was not their first language, the programme did not attract volunteers of a BME background. In order to address this in the future, specific community groups could be targeted. In addition, proactive, practical outreach should be undertaken to explain and advertise the project first hand. Such engagement would create stronger links with targeted organisations and groups.

“I’ve learnt a huge amount through the workshops that the programme has run. I really enjoyed looking at the sixteenth century clay pipes”



1 These percentages do not include results of the ten U3A volunteers recruited. Predominantly these volunteers were White: British, retired and over 55 years of age.  
2 For the majority of these volunteers English was not their first language.  
3 The category of 'student' can be of further defined as: 'School/College' (5%), 'Gap Year Student' (17%), 'Undergraduate' (28%), Postgraduate (28%) and 'Other' (22%).

Volunteer support

Throughout the VIP scheme, volunteers were offered the opportunity to attend a series of specialist workshops. In each phase of the scheme, sixteen workshops took place, with four sessions each on a variety of subjects including: Roman & medieval ceramics, clay tobacco pipes, Roman glass and animal bone. Sessions were led by a Museum specialist who would provide an overview of the topic and the collections and then focus on specific examples that VIP volunteers had been working with. The sessions then ended with a specific examination of some of the Museum’s Registered collections.

Feedback from volunteers showed that this was a highlight of the programme. They were very enthusiastic in attending and the sessions gave the volunteers the chance to develop knowledge and relate to the historical context of the artefacts they were processing at the Archive.

Volunteer Resources

In order to support the volunteers and provide them with an enjoyable volunteering experience, a number of resources were made available for them to use.

Handbook

A handbook was given to all volunteers working on the scheme as part of their induction, which covered essential aspects of the programme and volunteering at LAARC.

The handbook provided information on volunteer policies including expenses, diversity and security. It was used to introduce volunteers to Archive staff and working areas and importantly included the Museum’s volunteer agreement.

As the scheme progressed, the handbook was updated in response to comments from the volunteers. For example, a diary section where volunteers could record their experiences was included. A more substantial contact details section, a copy of the programme’s risk assessment, photographic consent policy and volunteer role description were also included.

Monitoring the usefulness of the handbook was carried out at various points in the scheme, with the majority of volunteers saying they found it “very useful” as a resource.

The handbook was also an invaluable tool for the ACOs. They found it indispensable in regards to creating a structured, standardised and professional induction for all VIP volunteers.

Online tools

As well as the handbook, volunteers also had access to the specially set up VIP blog, website, wiki page and photo sharing websites. These online interactive tools enabled the volunteers to keep up-to-date with the progression of the programme. Given that volunteers were coming into LAARC once a week this proved a great way of keeping in contact remotely and seeing what other volunteers have been involved in. The photo sharing website enabled volunteers to take and publish their own photos in order to share their work. This interactive element was significant for some volunteers to engage with the collections beyond their obvious archaeological value.

Visits and use of the website increased significantly as the scheme progressed with over 1000 page views to the site and increased use and interaction by volunteers half way through the scheme. Step-by-step guides to using the website, wiki page and writing a blog were also provided, adding to the skill set volunteers had gained through the scheme.



Common room

Volunteers were given access to the LAARC’s common room. This space was set aside for them to use at certain hours in the day, so that they had a designated place where they could take a break.

Notice board

To increase engagement between VIP volunteers and the established ‘long-term’ volunteers at LAARC, a notice board was provided for all volunteers in the LAARC’s common room. This acted as a communication



point between volunteers, as well as informing them of projects currently underway by all volunteers and displayed weekly photographs.

The notice board included the monthly ‘Archive Update’ newsletter, which was produced by the ACOs. It also included other volunteer opportunities that were available. In addition, it provided a place for VIP volunteers to offer anonymous feedback on the programme allowing them a further feeling of involvement.

“I really enjoyed the workshops, especially glassware... it was nice that they were organised for us”



# Achievements of the project

## Benefits to the museum

### Work strand 1: General Finds

The majority of material stored at LAARC is its General finds. This material is studied as an assemblage and includes major material groups such as ceramics, animal bone and building material. This work strand continued over all three phases of the programme as the focal work, concerned with early 1970s site archives.

#### Achievements

**Accessibility:** 37 site archives were updated to the Archive’s professional standard of collections care. These collections spanned 96.5 linear meters of shelving and totalled 1169 boxes worth of material.

**Storage:** Through updating and rationalising the material, a net gain of one linear meter of shelving was achieved. This equates to 20 boxes worth of material.

**Rationalisation:** Specific archaeological material was able to be discarded once recorded. Furthermore additional material was identified for future rationalisation in order to create more space.

**Rediscovery:** Over 100 objects found in the General finds were deemed ‘accessionable’ and therefore made Registered objects and transferred. Some artefacts discovered by volunteers and identified by specialists in the workshops were included in forthcoming publications. This emphasises the real impact the work of volunteers has on current research.

### Work Strand 2: Registered Finds

The Archive’s Registered finds are normally individual artefacts of singular importance that can be considered accessioned objects. Work involved auditing the objects, checking their storage condition and updating each object’s record card with correct data including a sketch of the object. The work on this side of the project was varied covering all materials and a range of object types. This work strand operated during the third phase of the project.

#### Achievements

**Accessibility:** A total of 5215 individual finds from 26 site archives were audited and their records updated with all relevant information including current location.

**Storage:** By efficiently repacking and reorganising these finds, overall the total number of boxes was reduced by six.

**Rediscovery:** A number of artefacts were displayed and pictures published on the web weekly. Select items were identified for future object handling sessions at the Museum of London.

### Work Strand 3: Metal Store

The third work strand focused upon a specific storage area of the Archive – its metal store, an independently monitored store for all metallic artefacts. Work involved manual handling, logistics of storage and creating an inventory of the LAARC’s metal collections. This work strand operated during the first and second phase of the project.

#### Achievements

**Accessibility & Storage:** 353 site archives had their General and Registered finds separated with Registered material transferred onto new accessible shelving and the General material remaining on existing shelves. Boxes that were previously out of sequence on overflow shelving were re-integrated back into their correct areas. Over 2000 boxes of material were transferred.

### Lessons learnt

One of the issues in operating a socially inclusive programme was the challenge of catering to the needs of a diverse range of people with different personal objectives. The work was varied in order to keep tasks stimulating and the nature of the work sometimes had to be adapted to suit individual volunteers. For example, certain volunteers were restricted in their ability to move boxes, which had to be considered. Other volunteers needed extra supervision when writing labels and ordering artefacts numerically due to learning difficulties and this had to be accommodated. This ensured that the experience was fulfilling for the volunteers regardless of their needs.

“I’d like to learn more about conservation and curatorship and to volunteer for other organisations”



Benefits to volunteers

Exit questionnaires

On finishing the scheme, volunteers were asked to complete an exit questionnaire to ascertain their experience of the scheme, to find out what they learnt and what they felt could be improved. Feedback on the VIP project was very positive from the volunteers, with most stating that they found the experience fulfilling on many levels.

The key feedback was:

- Across all phases of the scheme 100% of volunteers agreed that they would be interested in volunteering again at both the LAARC and the Museum of London
- All but one of the volunteers said that they would feel confident using the skills they had learnt on the VIP scheme within other museums and archives
- All but one of the volunteers said that they would be interested in volunteering at museums running similar projects.

This table shows a snapshot of questionnaire data that volunteers gave on the programme.

Exit questionnaire: Breakdown of results

| Now that the project has finished, to what extent do you feel that:                           | Not at all | To a limited extent | To a good extent | To a high extent |
|---|------------|---------------------|------------------|------------------|
| You enjoyed volunteering?   |            |                     | 13%              | 87%              |
| You became more motivated to be creative and engage in new learning opportunities?            |            | 3%                  | 44%              | 53%              |
| You could take these skills to other museums/archives involved in similar volunteer projects? |            |                     | 29%              | 71%              |
| Your reading and writing skills improved?   | 37%        | 37%                 | 18%              | 8%               |
| To what extent do you feel your objectives were met by the project?                           |            |                     | 26%              | 74%              |
| You gained useful skills/knowledge as a result of the project?                                |            | 3%                  | 31%              | 66%              |

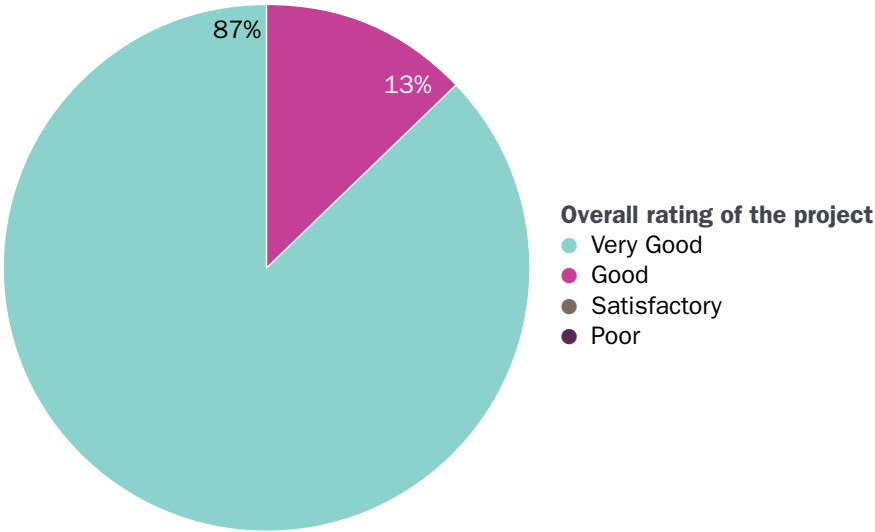
“I didn’t have any knowledge about archaeology before I started volunteering at LAARC. I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to learn a new skill”

Results show all of the volunteers enjoyed participating in the scheme and felt they were able to gain new learning experiences to a “good” or “high” extent (97%). They also indicated that participation in the scheme gave them the confidence to be able to use their newly acquired skills in similar volunteering projects (100%).

Some results provide an insight into how specific skills such as reading and writing will only apply to a selection of volunteers. For those for whom English is not their first language these skills are extremely beneficial, reflected by a quarter of volunteers who stated their reading and writing skills improved to a “good” or “high” extent (26%).

The volunteers also felt strongly that the objectives of the project had been met from their perspective and a large number of volunteers gave a high overall rating (74%). One volunteer gave the programme a “five star rating” with another stating that the programme was “great as it is” when asked how it could be improved.

As well as 100% of volunteers saying they would be interested in volunteering again at the LAARC and within the Museum of London, the programme also saw many volunteers expressing a further interest in continuing to volunteer and in working in museums or archaeology in more general terms. In response to this, the ACOs were proactive in identifying other museum volunteering opportunities for the VIP scheme participants.



“I am going to continue to gain work experience and volunteering in different areas... this volunteering has opening my eyes to new opportunities”





Meeting new people

Volunteers also commented that they had enjoyed working with people from different backgrounds. Many volunteers said that this had been the favourite part of the project.



Handling history

Volunteers were also enthusiastic about being able to handle and analyse artefacts and look further into their background both through the workshops and via the Archaeological Collections Officers.

“Different people from different backgrounds working together to do something useful for the museum”

“I really enjoyed finding interesting objects hidden in the boxes and being able to ask for more information about what they were...”

Sustainability

Further opportunities for volunteers

As the Volunteer Inclusion Programme offered a short-term volunteering opportunity, the need to sustain volunteers and enable them to use the skills they had learnt in other museums and archives became apparent. This need was supported by the results of the exit questionnaire which revealed that 100% of volunteers would be confident to use skills acquired during the scheme at other institutions. Therefore, the need to source further opportunities was later incorporated into the programme objectives.

The programme was very successful in sourcing new opportunities for ex-VIP participants. These opportunities included projects within the Museum of London and identifying volunteers who were suitable to be taken on as long-term volunteers at the LAARC.

By the end of the scheme, a number of ex-VIP participants had already become involved with other volunteering opportunities. Four previous VIP participants became regular volunteers at LAARC, two volunteered on a short-term project in the Museum of London’s Conservation Department. Three previous participants volunteered as ‘schools volunteers’ in the Museum’s Learning Department.

Five signed up to take part in the Thames Discovery Programme. This programme was a collaborative project run by the Thames Estuary Partnership and the Thames Explorer Trust, with support from the Museum of London, English Heritage and the University College London.

Beyond LAARC

The success of the VIP scheme led to versions being set up in other local museums in London.

Having identified a number of outer borough museums holding archaeological collections, the VIP project team initiated the ‘roll out’ of the scheme. Local volunteers upgraded their archaeological collections in line with the LAARC’s professional standards. Consequently, these museums now have volunteers from their community working in teams, handling real archaeology and learning new skills.

One successful example is Harrow Museum. The museum already had an established group of volunteers who received collections care training and guidance from the ACOs and have initiated a new project. This project is undertaking the repackaging of objects to a professional standard of collection care, registering ‘accessionable’ finds and creating a digital record of the collections. The collections have also been divided into excavated and donated materials improving their accessibility and storage. Two ex-VIP volunteers have led this group.

# Conclusion

## The successes

The Volunteer Inclusion Programme has been an extremely successful scheme. It has achieved its key aims of recruiting volunteers from a variety of backgrounds in order to be as socially inclusive as possible and to provide them with new experiences and skills. It has improved archaeological collections held at the LAARC and created wider access to archaeological records.

- **A focus on collections.** The work undertaken by volunteers had a massive impact and gain for the Museum. This is most discernible when the number of volunteer hours (a total of over 2000 for all three project phases) is multiplied against the national minimum wage of £5.80. The resulting figure is over £13k.
- **A focus on people.** By undertaking an inclusion project (rather than a scheme working solely with socially excluded groups) participants had a far greater experience developing an awareness of inclusive work environments whilst gaining fundamental soft skills as well as collections care knowledge.
- **Handling archaeology.** The key to the interest in the scheme was the fact that volunteers had a rare opportunity to not only directly handle historic collections, but make a worthwhile contribution to London’s archaeology.
- **Social Inclusion.** Through recruiting an inclusive range of volunteers it proved essential that two full time members of staff were needed. The wider the range of participants the greater the individual needs that may require support. The scheme is evidence that although challenging, social inclusion projects provide real results.

## Future directions

The remaining four phases of the programme will continue to build upon the success of inclusive volunteering. The programme will focus its attention towards engaging community groups and new work strands will be identified to let the programme evolve.

“Now that the project has finished I would like to volunteer more”

## Further information

If you would like more information about the programme, please contact the Archaeological Collections Officers:

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