

Case Study on Volunteers' Zooms

On March 23rd 2020, the UK entered the first of several nationwide lockdowns owing to the coronavirus pandemic. The Heritage Hub, along with all other venues and most public buildings, closed, and Gloucestershire Archives' staff started working from home.

This meant that none of our volunteers was able to come in; when we reopened, and in between lockdowns, we limited the number of people on-site, so there were further restrictions on volunteers being able to come in.

Some of our volunteers are older people, many with long-term conditions and who may have been clinically vulnerable in terms of coronavirus infections. Despite all restrictions having been lifted, in February 2022, several volunteers either decided to "retire" or not to venture back for the moment.

As a result of the first lockdown, we introduced two new projects to meet the needs of our volunteers:

1. Remote volunteering – where we asked groups of volunteers to transcribe digitised documents from our collections that were available on Ancestry. Volunteers would regularly email their transcripts to a named member of staff, who would check them, give feedback, and input details of them to our online catalogue.
2. Volunteers' Zooms – these were introduced in May 2020, and were once a week (on a Wednesday) for an hour. They were intended as social occasions, with an opportunity for a group of self-selected volunteers to chat, both about how they were coping with the lockdown and about what remote volunteering (if any) they were doing. Above all, it provided a chance to simply keep in touch.

The Volunteers' Zooms have proved to be very successful, and a valued means of support for those who participate. They are hosted on Zoom by staff from the learning and outreach team. We publicised them by emailing all of our volunteers, asking them to let us know if they wanted to attend. We drew up a list of a core group of about a dozen or so volunteers, although we made it clear that (a) any volunteer could join, at any point; (b) volunteers did not have to stay for the whole hour; (c) we would help those who may like to participate, but who did not have access to Zoom, to download the app on to their personal device/s.

The Volunteers' Zooms give everyone a chance to speak for a few minutes. Discussions included tips for research problems, summaries of what each volunteer was working on, shared items of news, checking how individuals were coping at home with day to day tasks, such as getting shopping and offered a general sense of

camaraderie. Individuals who were identified as particularly vulnerable were, on occasion, telephoned at home or offered further practical support (such as the loan of IT equipment). The hosts (2 members of the team) scheduled the Zoom call, and circulated the link a day or two beforehand. If someone was expected, but didn't show up, staff would discreetly enquire about them.

The Volunteers' Zooms regularly had around 12 participants, although weekly attendance figures varied at anything from about 8 to about 20 people. On the rare occasions when staff were unavailable to host the call, a volunteer in the group became the surrogate host, and this worked well. There have been a number of technical issues, from time to time, and these have been mildly frustrating, but it has proven to be an excellent way to keep in touch, and for some of our volunteers to feel a part of something – a network, a friendship group, a social circle, albeit virtually rather than face to face.

The volunteers that have participated have universally valued this service. We have received unsolicited feedback that it has helped, and been an important means by which they have been able to communicate with like minded others and to feel included.

In December 2021, we discussed with the participants the thorny issue of whether or not the Volunteers' Zooms should be disbanded. All of the participants wanted them to continue, despite a number of them having returned to regular on-site visits. Providing this kind of resource intensive service, and for people who remain extremely keen and grateful, always poses a bit of a conundrum. In an effort to seek a way forward – despite demand being high, but from a reduced number of participants, and where the initial urgency and, to some extent, need had dissipated – we asked the volunteers to consider 4 options for a way forward. We reached a mutually acceptable compromise: the Zooms would continue from January to March 2022, as fortnightly events only (no longer weekly), with a review in April 2022.

The review in April 2022 will, again, consider all the options and participants will be asked, once more, to come to a consensus within the limits of what we are able to provide. We have been proud to support our volunteers in this way, through unprecedented challenges and difficulties felt by all.