
Absolutely rooted. Absolutely Hull.

Volunteering Programme

Evaluation Report

Prepared for Spirit of 2012

April 2021



**Absolutely
Cultured**

Background



One of the most celebrated and widely recognised success stories of Hull's year as UK City of Culture was its Volunteer Programme. As well as demonstrating incredible positive impacts on those who participated, the programme was an embodiment of Hull's appetite to get involved, get behind the year and to step up and support the city and its communities.

In total, 2,757 individuals have joined the Volunteer Programme since its launch in 2016.

Presenting huge potential for how this spirit could be captured and built upon, there was commitment amongst volunteers, partners and in the city to see the Volunteer Programme continue beyond 2017 and to achieve a successful volunteering legacy.

It was succeeding as an ambitious, at-scale, city-wide programme with numerous examples of best practice but it was yet to be seen whether and how this could be sustained beyond a mega event such as City of Culture and unclear exactly how it would need to adapt and respond to do so. This report presents the Volunteer Programme journey towards a sustainable, post City of Culture future and the learnings during this three-year phase.

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Summary & Conclusions

Findings are based on a wide range of sources, including both desk research and primary data collection with a range of stakeholder groups such as:

- Volunteers
- Audiences (members of the public)
- Volunteer host organisations
- Event leads
- Volunteer Programme managers
- Absolutely Cultured SLT



1. The ambition

A sustainable, ambitious city-wide volunteering programme



The opportunity presented was a sustained, city-wide (and potentially regional) volunteering programme that could attract and retain high numbers of people to contribute to their communities and place. It had the potential to have a significant impact on the quality and prevalence of volunteering for the city, benefiting wider sectors as well as Hull's people, whether participating themselves or through the improved experiences that volunteers would enable.

A sustainable, ambitious city-wide volunteering programme



The programme model had succeeded in making volunteering accessible and attractive to a wide range and high number of people.

Placing volunteers, their needs, situations and motivations at the heart, the programme successfully reduced barriers to volunteering (whether perceived or real) and provided an experience which increased levels of engagement with volunteering.

It provided varied, rewarding and easy ways to volunteer, enabling people to give as much or as little time as they wanted and participate in a way they were comfortable with. This made available a large pool of people who could be contacted about opportunities to opt into shifts.

Through a high quality and rewarding volunteering experience combined with the variety of volunteering opportunities, volunteers would become increasingly engaged with volunteering, contributing in more and different ways.

The investment into the programme around the City of Culture year and the 'pulling power' of the event itself had created a catalyst moment in stimulating appetite for volunteering and critically had allowed innovative approaches to be piloted.

2. The changed environment



The post 2017 aftermath



Absolutely Cultured was formed as a Hull City of Culture 2017 successor organisation to take forward some of the most significant successes of 2017, including the Volunteer Programme, thereby making a substantial contribution to a cultural legacy for the city.

Launched in 2018 as a registered charity, Absolutely Cultured received legacy funding which would contribute to supporting the organisation during its first three years as it explored sustainable models and secured further funding for the legacy programmes and projects. Alongside this, it would work to establish its sustainable role as a new cultural organisation in the city. Spirit of 2012 contributed further funding to the Volunteer Programme to support its transition towards sustainability.

Unlike the year itself, the future role of Absolutely Cultured and the projects and programmes were not defined. Whilst the activities which would make up this new organisation during its first few years had been determined, quite how they came together as a whole, how they might be funded longer-term and whether they should continue within one organisation was yet to be determined.

Quite how culture and the city would look beyond 2017 and what that would mean for volunteering opportunities was evolving and could not be pre-planned, but it was clear that the model developed that was so successful for 2017 would need to change in order to be a sustainable programme longer-term.

The momentum paradox



The City of Culture year had exceeded all expectations in terms of the scale of what was delivered due in no small part to the level of funding it attracted both through the Hull 2017 organisation and directly for organisations themselves. It had created a huge appetite for more. Intended as a catalyst for change through culture, expectations of continued momentum were high. The city did not want to lose this opportunity to keep it going, to build forward and certainly not go back to the way it was before.

The context around a City of Culture year is exceptional. A not to be missed moment of opportunity and a focused period of time that has a beginning and an end. With that came a clear set of defined goals, a framework and a co-ordinated collective approach. In a post City of Culture world, legacy would be shared, with each organisation working to their own aims and objectives, all evolving in their own ways.

This ambition to make the most of the potential along with high expectation of continued momentum, whilst clearly a positive also brought challenges for the cultural sector, the city and to the Volunteer Programme. The future was unwritten, and the environment was changed. Certainly the level of potential funding was likely to be much lower in future years.

For many volunteers as well as the general public, this expectation of continued momentum was focused around the vibrancy that had been brought to the city through large-scale events and a high frequency and volume of cultural activity. Whilst some large events were planned in 2018 and 2019, there was no certainty these could continue to be funded.

For the Volunteer Programme, it was not yet clear how the model that was developed within this mega event context could continue at scale. Particularly longer-term when attracting new volunteers.

- Could the programme be as appealing without the high volume and exciting opportunities? What might replace them?
- Can a model which works best at-scale and open to everyone, continue on a significantly reduced budget and how might such a model be funded going forward?

The geography



Whilst Hull UK City of Culture was focused on impacts for Hull, there was also involvement of the East Riding (the surrounding areas of Hull). For the Volunteer Programme, in 2020, 48% of volunteers were East Riding residents. Some of the volunteering activity was operating in the East Riding already but there was potential to explore further expansion.

Now being within Absolutely Cultured, a charity with objects and receiving funding for activities focused on Hull, this did create a challenge that needed consideration.

The deployment model



The deployment model implemented for City of Culture enabled the operating model to be volunteer-centric, accessible and high volume. With a digital interface, it took out a lot of the resource heavy volunteer management often needed with other models. It enabled volunteers to view their own record of volunteering. It also provided a rich source of data for reporting purposes.

The team would work with host organisations to publish volunteering opportunities and volunteers would select shifts themselves. Host organisations would be responsible for day to day management of volunteers. A programme of volunteer engagement, Masterclasses and celebration events provided ongoing engagement with the act of volunteering and a feeling of belonging to a bigger purpose.

The model presented a number of benefits. It allowed resource to be focused on host relationships and developing new opportunities, volunteer recruitment and engagement rather than day to day management of volunteers, which can be resource heavy with other models.

The downsides from a host point of view was that whilst this model could provide a high volume of volunteers completing shifts, shift adoption was not always guaranteed. The volunteer could select based on their own interests in the opportunity and so some were more popular than others. The team could monitor this and take steps over time to remedy through targeted communication, host and volunteer training etc but it was identified by some hosts as a potential negative. It was also less suitable when volunteering is role specific and a one to one relationship with the organisation may work best.

There is a delay as shifts are loaded onto the system and volunteers select them. A minimum delay of 72 hours is required to ensure shifts can be seen by volunteers and filled and to allow the team to respond if shifts are not filled.

Whilst no model is perfect, this still appears to be the best option but would need consideration if the role of volunteers became more role specific, in more urgent and reactive situations and when shift fulfilment is more critical.

Broadening volunteering beyond culture



The programme originated as a participation programme around the city of culture year so its roots and purpose were very much cultural, heritage and visitor engagement volunteering.

However, volunteering cuts across sectors and some volunteers were or had previously volunteered for different organisations outside of this. The programme's existence caused some frustrations amongst the VCS sector in the city initially as there was a feeling volunteers, who they found hard to recruit and retain, were choosing to volunteer for the City of Culture programme instead. For some of these organisations, particularly the smaller ones, volunteers are critical for their operations so this created challenges for some of them.

We knew that volunteers were also likely continuing to volunteer outside of the programme for different organisations, particularly post City of Culture so there was opportunity to explore the role of the programme beyond culture, heritage and visitor engagement.

Within a newly established cultural charity which was dependent on funding and which would need to establish its sustainable route as an organisation and which had a defined set of charitable objects, this presented a challenge which needed consideration.

Whilst the programme still has the potential to broaden beyond culture, consultation with volunteers throughout 2019 showed this shouldn't be done at the sacrifice of the programme's DNA. Its role in cultural development and delivery for the city and the role culture and volunteers can have in supporting communities to develop and thrive.

3. The volunteer role



Responding to change



With its roots in cultural, heritage and visitor engagement volunteering but in a changed post city of culture environment, it was necessary to explore the role of volunteers going forward.

- There was significant potential for volunteers to have a bigger impact on Hull's communities, particularly around enhancing health and wellbeing, social cohesion, anti-social issues and improving neighbourhoods.
- The programme had already been acting as a conduit to other organisations, promoting opportunities through regular volunteer communications, through Masterclasses, workshops and volunteer engagement events.
- There was appetite amongst volunteers to be able to access these through the same platform and to be integrated into the wider programme.
- Volunteers who were becoming increasingly engaged wanted opportunities to utilise their skills and experience in a more meaningful way.

During 2018 and 2019, with some large-scale events still continuing, the Volunteer Programme was still operating at scale and recruiting new volunteers. The team was well staffed at this point and was able to explore and introduce volunteering opportunities beyond culture.

Social Action projects were piloted throughout this time to explore the role of volunteers in communities.

Ambassador of place



An important role for the volunteers, particularly during 2017, had been as highly visible ambassadors for visitors to the city and for residents attending various venues and events. They had become a trusted human face of the city and what it had to offer. In their recognisable blue uniforms, they had become a stamp of quality creating an expectation that a good experience would be had.

A significant proportion of volunteering time was contributing to museums, galleries, tourism centres and hotspots, as well as supporting consultation processes with residents.

The programme of training, Masterclasses and events which host organisations and partners contributed to, meant that volunteers were also kept informed about a wide range of activity (including development / regeneration work), helping them to become knowledgeable and effective advocates for the city.

As the team looked to future sustainability for the programme, whilst incredibly valuable for the city and a role which many volunteers enjoyed, this was an area that raised questions around ongoing funding outside of any local authority support.

Fabric of the city – the uniform



The scandalous blue uniform became synonymous with Hull 2017 and volunteer ambassadors.

It is instantly recognisable by members of the public and is widely associated with a warm welcome, safety, knowledge, pride and support.

For many volunteers, it is an essential component, giving credibility to their role.

For organisations who use the volunteers, feedback suggests that their presence not only enhances the audience experience, but lends credibility to their projects by establishing a tangible connection to one of the city's proudest moments.

“Our customers really liked it as well because of the presence [of the volunteers], because it’s a continuation of 2017, and there was still something going on from that point of view.”

“They’re a lovely presence and very reassuring – that’s the thing with 2017, when you saw a blue person you knew you were in the right place and you knew you were going to get all the help you needed.”

“Having people in those blue coats at your events, it wasn’t necessarily a seal of approval, but being associated with this group, it lent credibility. You turn up and you see the people in blue coats welcoming you, you feel like it’s part of a wider thing, not just a standalone event, you’re part of this wider arts and cultural scene in the city.”

- Volunteer Host Organisations

Fabric of the city – the uniform



Whilst clearly bringing benefits, the uniform also presented some challenges.

Invoking memories of Hull's year in the spotlight was not always a positive. This presented a question as to whether the uniform could be preventing volunteering from being forward-looking.

For some organisations, volunteers not being branded in their own brand has been a barrier for inclusion in the programme.

For some individuals, particularly younger or within some of Hull's outreaching neighbourhoods, the uniform has created a barrier for participation. Feedback from volunteers working with refugee communities, who don't see the connection with City of Culture, suggests the volunteer uniform can be perceived as authoritative, creating an initial barrier rather than aiding engagement.



Engaging with and enhancing communities



Volunteers had become a valuable asset when engaging with communities. As residents themselves across every area of Hull and into East Riding, they were recognised and trusted but also informal. There was greater potential to expand their role within local communities to have greater impact.

Alongside the social action pilots which are covered in a later section, volunteers also began supporting organisations and the public sector including the local authority to consult and engage communities with planned initiatives.

This presented an area of opportunity that the team had planned to explore further.

The operational delivery and direction of the programme



With a committed pool of volunteers who were dedicated to the programme's continuation and with a real desire for it to thrive, there was potential for greater volunteer involvement in the delivery of the programme.

Areas that would be explored included,

- Recruitment, selection, and support
- Training and development
- Programme communications and monitoring and evaluation

A volunteer consultation panel was established in late 2019 called Volunteer Voice with the aim of formalising a volunteer board or steering group. Whilst formalising the arrangement was deferred due to changing plans, Volunteer Voice have been instrumental in shaping the future direction of the programme towards sustainability.

4. Community impact



Helping local organisations in supporting communities



According to host organisations, the Volunteer Programme has allowed them to deliver bigger and more ambitious projects, enabling them to reach and engage with communities in a far more meaningful and cost-effective way.

There is consensus that audiences feel 'in safe hands' when the Absolutely Cultured volunteers are involved, encouraging participation, greater interaction and enhancing their experience of the events and activities they take part in.

Evidence suggests that working with volunteers brings fresh ideas and perspectives to organisations, enabling them to evaluate and refine what they do to better meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Volunteers have also been used to support ongoing research and development, helping organisations such as Hull CCG to test ideas and strategies before they are rolled out to the local community, demonstrating the value and versatility of the volunteers beyond 'traditional' volunteering opportunities. Recent examples include Living with Water, Refill Champions and Cancer Champions.

What volunteer host organisations had to say:

"The events that we put on are really varied and they target very different audience groups...so you find that the volunteers bring people to you."

"Having people in those blue coats at your events, it wasn't necessarily a seal of approval, but being associated with this group, it lent credibility. You turn up and you see the people in blue coats welcoming you, you feel like it's part of a wider thing, not just a standalone event, you're part of this wider arts and cultural scene in the city."

"They have brought expertise to our events. Because they are part of the team when they come to volunteer, their suggestions are things that you don't look at, they prompt you, they ask you things about how you can do things better, and that's a big plus for us. We've done a lot of things differently because the volunteers openly evaluate what we do."

"It makes the experience for audiences so much richer"

Social Action volunteering



In 2018 a series of pilot projects began, which explored whether volunteer-led social action – a more informal approach to engaging with HTR communities – was effective, and additionally whether this could be a viable route to long-term sustainability for the programme. Further detail can be found in the Social Action project evaluation.

The projects have provided a blueprint for effective community engagement and co-creation with communities that will allow Absolutely Cultured to better understand their wants and needs, and how barriers to engagement and participation (including cultural) can be addressed. The organisation has gathered extensive knowledge on how to engage Hull's most isolated communities.

The volunteer-led social action projects evaluation indicates that this type of activity can have huge benefits on communities. Residents participating in the projects reported increased and improved levels of wellbeing, social connectedness and personal development.

The evaluation found that social action projects had helped in making residents feel thought of and special, providing a change of narrative for the area, creating positive interactions, and through physically “demonstrating” what a small number of people can achieve.

Social action benefit for communities



Whilst the long-term impacts of the social action projects are yet to be measured (due in part to delays caused by COVID-19), the range and depth of impacts holds promise, particularly as volunteers have been inspired and empowered to take more action in their local community.

Approximately half of the volunteers involved reported feeling more able to run an activity/project in their own community and/or feeling they can take action to positively change their community as a result of the experience, and a small number had already taken some practical steps in this regard. This supports the notion that volunteering in any capacity can lead to increased engagement with, and more positive feelings towards, the community (see below).

“We’ve always talked about keeping the magic and having that sprinkling of excitement, and that’s still there with the social action projects, so we still get that sense with much less money and spectacle, they still get that same feeling. It’s just getting them to that point where they feel comfortable signing up to that small thing but I think we’ve been quite successful at that.”

Volunteer Programme team member

As a direct result of volunteering...	79%	61%	63%
	...increased their engagement level with the community of Hull	...said they now feel that they can take action to improve their community	...said they felt like they had more of a stake in society
SOURCE: Wave 5 volunteer midpoint survey 2019 (n=53)			

5. Sector impact



Wider sector volunteering



The Volunteer Programme team initially sought to diversify the types of opportunities for volunteers as a means of establishing long-term sustainability. It did so by expanding its network of partners across multiple sectors, demonstrated by the volume of volunteer hours dedicated to non arts-related projects, shown opposite.

Clearly there was potential to become a city-wide and cross sector volunteering programme but the additional resource required to continue this at a time when the programme needed to look to affordability, proved to be unrealistic.

In addition, the future of the programme needed to evolve alongside plans for Absolutely Cultured. As a cultural organisation, it was important the Volunteer Programme within Absolutely Cultured would need to be aligned.

At this time it was also considered whether the programme could become an independent organisation and whether that would open up different possibilities. Again, this should not be ruled out for the future but in the short term this wasn't a realistic option.

Examples of non-arts sector volunteer opportunities (2018-2021):

Community Soup Kitchen	Over 2,224 volunteer hours
Emergency Response – including supported shopping and prescription collection	Over 3,100 volunteer hours
University of Hull Guided Tours, Orientations & Degree Ceremony Support	Over 975 volunteer hours
Food Bank Support	Over 118 volunteer hours
Dove House Hospice – Fundraising Event Support	Over 960 volunteer hours

Programme impact on wider volunteering sector



Prior to the emergence of the Volunteer Programme, responsibility for the recruitment, training and management of volunteers lay primarily with individual organisations.

The Volunteer Programme provided a citywide volunteer infrastructure for the first time, harnessing the true potential of the volunteer workforce and providing a framework to understand the economic and social value of their work. However, there was some concern that volunteers would be diverted away from pre-existing roles supporting smaller organisations – particularly those operating outside the culture sector.

In fact, according to the most recent volunteer survey, the programme appears to be reaffirming individuals' commitment to volunteering, and encouraging them to access more varied opportunities:

60% of volunteers have volunteered elsewhere (since joining Absolutely Cultured)

- 31% were introduced to these opportunities through volunteering with Absolutely Cultured

43% would NOT have volunteered elsewhere if they hadn't volunteered with Absolutely Cultured

- 58% said it had shown them how volunteering can have a positive impact
- 47% said it had given them more confidence to volunteer
- 47% said it had inspired them to explore new opportunities

Other volunteering roles / organisations volunteered for since joining the Volunteer Programme

Health or wellbeing support	39%
Art, music or theatre	19%
Community / amateur sport	19%
Environment / conservation group	15%
Museum / heritage organisation	14%
School or university	11%
Other - non arts related	8%
Food bank	7%
Church / religious group	6%
Homelessness charity	5%



Programme impact on wider volunteering sector



A recent volunteer survey found that many volunteers in the programme were either 'first time' volunteers or hadn't volunteered elsewhere in the 5 years prior to joining the programme. 34.49% had not volunteered before and of those who had, over half had not done so in the 5 years prior to joining. Combining both of these, 67.25% had either never volunteered before or hadn't in a significant amount of time (5 years).

The programme has had a significant role in introducing volunteers to wider volunteering opportunities whether introduced through or completely outside of the programme. It's clear their involvement develops their engagement with volunteering as a whole, benefiting other organisations and communities.

60% of volunteers claim to have volunteered elsewhere, and 43% attributed this directly to their experience with the Volunteer Programme. Furthermore, the range of opportunities they have accessed demonstrates that these benefits are being felt beyond just the culture sector, particularly in the area of health & wellbeing (driven largely by the COVID-19 response).

A further 10.7% had initiated or got involved with community initiatives. This is significant in showing the role of the programme within the wider landscape given the number who had previously volunteered in the 5 years prior to joining or volunteered at all.

6. A different demographic



Changes in volunteer demographics



"Absolutely Cultured demonstrates a strong commitment to involving volunteers from all backgrounds and its volunteer team is reflective of the communities in which it works."

-Investing in Volunteers Report, 2019

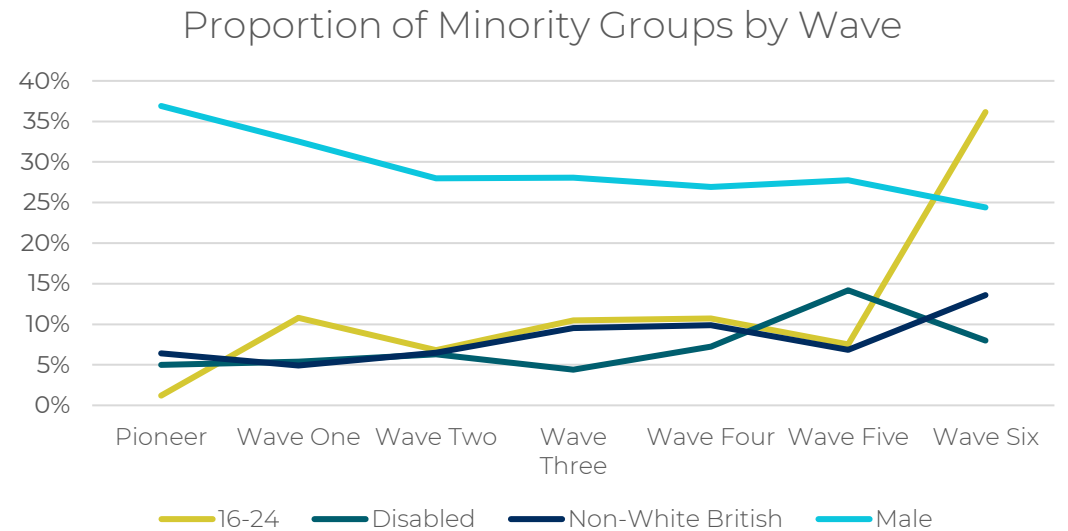
During 2018 and 2019, the team explored different approaches to expand the demographic of volunteers.

Whilst the demographics of the Volunteer Programme have broadly been representative of the wider population, there were some sub-groups which had lower representation amongst the volunteer cohort. These include under 25s; men; BAME / Polish community; people living with a disability; and over 75s.

During 2018/2019, the team put in place various strategies to engage and recruit these HTR groups, including:

- Consulting and collaborating with education providers and VCS groups already working with these audiences, e.g. Humber All Nations Alliance, schools / colleges, Elephant in the Room (disability support).
- Outreach work and promotional activity in specific neighbourhoods such as Beverley Road (with a large Eastern European population) and veterans villages (with a large unemployed male population).
- Tailoring communication to address perceived barriers (e.g. lack of time) and focus on key benefits of volunteering likely to interest each audience, (e.g. the CV development angle for young people).

Targeted recruitment for Wave 6 (Feb/Mar 2019), alongside the broadening of volunteer opportunities, appears to have been effective in boosting representation amongst many of these groups. The most notable success has been in the proportion of under 25s, who represented 36% of the total cohort in Wave Six, compared to 11% in Wave One (and only 1% of Pioneer Volunteers). There has also been a steady increase in the proportion of BAME and people with disabilities.



Changes in volunteer demographics



It is certainly possible with targeted approaches and ensuring opportunities match volunteer motivations to reach different demographics of volunteer. It is recognised that maintaining a pool of younger volunteers particularly can be challenging and retention is often much lower than with other age groups.

Certainly during the Covid response Absolutely Cultured and other organisations saw a younger and broader demographic. Partly because of furlough meaning they had more time available but also because the pandemic response brought out a new feeling of wanting to support the national efforts amongst these groups.

During the transition phase of 2020, focusing on attracting a more diverse cohort of volunteer was put on hold.

It is recognised that recruiting and retaining younger volunteers is very possible through a targeted approach to recruitment and engagement but this is more resource heavy in terms of managing both recruitment and retention.



4. The transition plan

Moment to people-powered movement



In 2019, an options appraisal was undertaken. The Volunteer Programme Team consulted with volunteers, host organisations and stakeholders to explore how the model could adapt for the future and to identify the key components that would need to be retained.

Through conversations, surveys and workshops, volunteers worked with staff to explore the future of the programme and to determine which components and characteristics of the programme they valued. This helped to identify the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the programme, and to come up with creative, more affordable solutions and to identify the shift that would need to be made.

“That sense of ownership over something is so important and is central to the success. That’s what volunteers tell us in varying ways, what they’re saying is that what’s kept them engaged is that they feel like they have a role in shaping the future of the city through the work they do. Not everyone has the same degree of need but they do need to feel like they own the programme as much as the programme they’re working for.”

- Volunteer Programme & Absolutely Cultured Team

Moment to people-powered movement



Major events require **mass mobilising...**

...transactional models where the volunteer 'purchases', with their time, a desired benefit (once-in-a-lifetime, behind-the-scenes access).

Sustainable volunteer organisations from Parkrun to Reddit to GoodGym instead work by **organising:**

- Cultivating **leaders** from within the volunteer base,
- Integrating** them throughout the structure and process,
- Channelling **power and responsibility** through them to deliver affordable and meaningful impact.

The focus of the programme would be developing social action but enhanced by city-wide volunteering. The programme would need to ensure it retained the city of culture DNA, the spirit which would be essential to its success and to avoid becoming a generic model. For volunteers, whilst broadening out beyond culture and communities, it was seen as essential that they retained a strong identity and didn't become generic. The programme's primary role was supporting the cultural sector and its role in the city's development and this is a strong part of the programme's identity.

The New Proposition



FROM a programme that...		TO a programme that...
... acts as a marketplace of a multitude of casual shifts to be selected by volunteers.	→	... enables a movement of active citizens to join and contribute to...
... provides a free resource of volunteers and management support for volunteer host organisations.	→	... creates value by making it easy and cost-effective to work directly with citizens.

Changing roles of volunteers and staff



Volunteer roles would become:

- Varied and value-adding
- Contributory to the core operation of the programme and Absolutely Cultured as a whole.

Functions which volunteers have successfully delivered elsewhere (from the National Trust to the Samaritans) include:

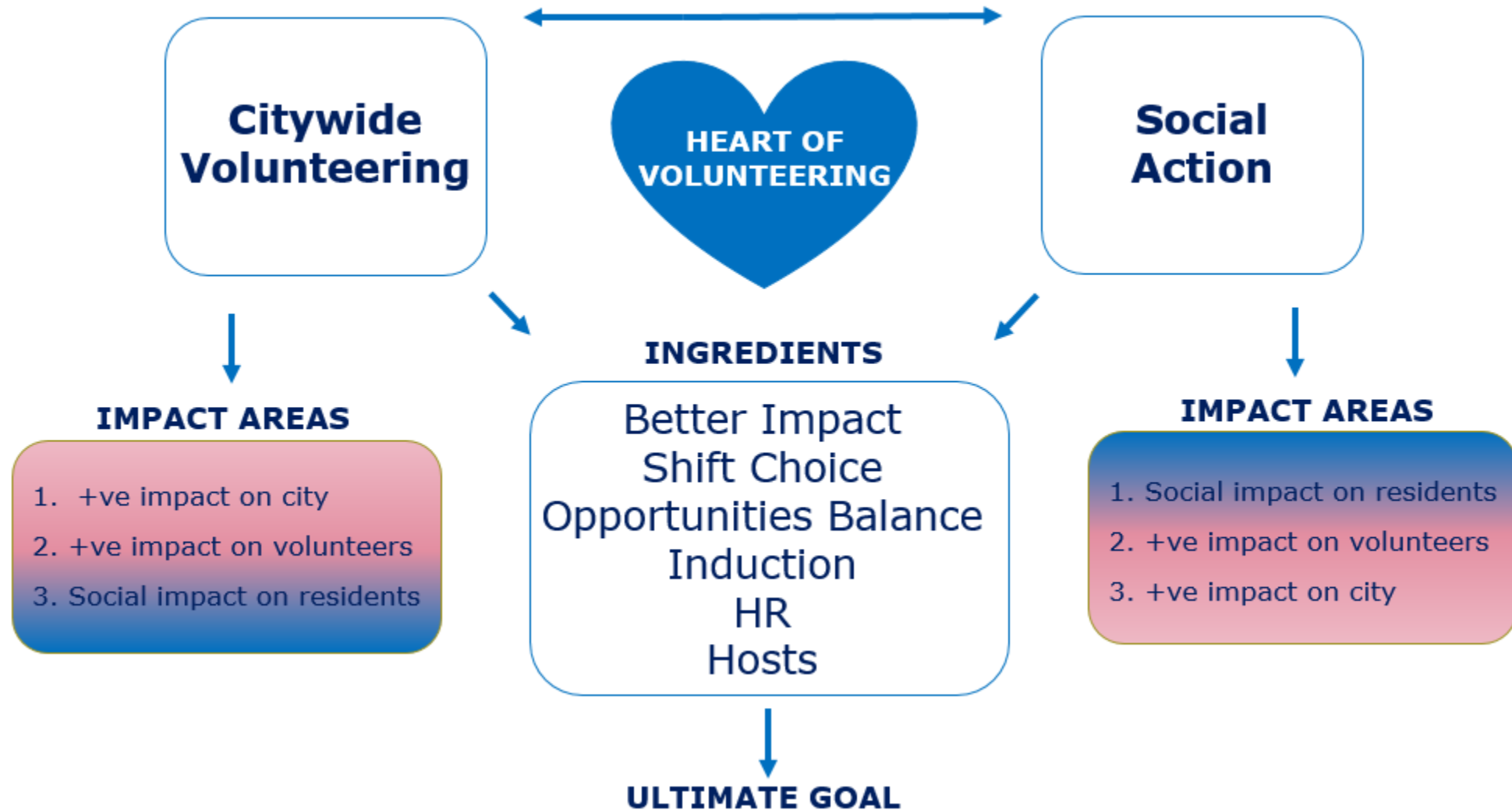
- Recruitment, selection, and support
- Training and development
- Programme communications and monitoring and evaluation

The planned expansion of volunteer contributions, combined with a reduction in quantity of activity and in level of 'service' to volunteers, will make possible a significant reduction in staff costs.

Staffing roles will be more about:

- Enabling rather than servicing
- Facilitation
- Careful transition planning

Social Action and City-wide volunteering



8. The essentials



Retaining the cultural DNA



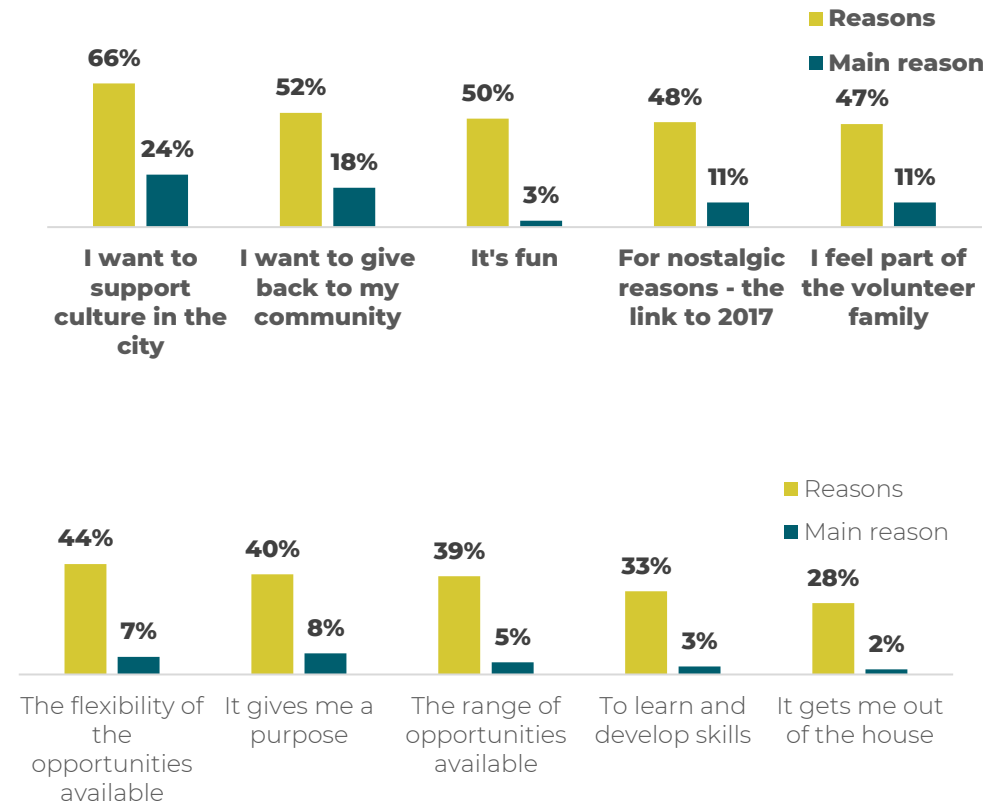
Throughout this engagement process, it became clear that whilst broadening the programme beyond its origins was a realistic ambition, it should not be done at the sacrifice of the programme's DNA. For volunteers, this could be understood as supporting culture to thrive and contributing to the role of culture in Hull's success. Support to Hull's communities was also seen as a key motivator.

There is no doubt that the feelgood link to UK City of Culture 2017 remains a factor in why people continue to volunteer for Absolutely Cultured and is an essential component in sustainability: 48% said so in a recent survey. However, the most compelling factor appears to be a desire to support culture in the city: 66% said this was a reason, and 24% said this was the MAIN reason they continued to volunteer.

In 2018 around 9 out of 10 volunteers agreed that they felt like they belonged as a Hull 2017 volunteer, stemming from the unique and unforgettable experiences they shared with a community of like-minded people. Building on these strong foundations, the team have continued to develop the concept of a volunteering 'family', creating regular opportunities for volunteers to collaborate and socialise beyond their regular shifts.

However, the connection to 2017 has also created a challenge for the team in terms of meeting volunteer expectations and looking to the future of culture in the city.

Why do you continue to volunteer with us? (n=467)



Belonging to something bigger and more impactful



Retaining the strong sense of belonging was identified as a programme strength and separates it from generic programmes which focus on recruitment, vetting and training and primarily match volunteers with organisations.

The programme of training, Masterclasses and events means that volunteers are also kept informed about a wide range of activity (including development / regeneration work), helping them to become knowledgeable and effective advocates for the city.

The team reviewed all aspects of volunteer engagement as well as the role of identity for volunteers, i.e. uniform and relationship to the programme and organisation.

Anecdotally, volunteers also value the quality of volunteering experiences, (including the range and quality of opportunities), made possible by the formal management structure and systems in place. This includes a training programme for all host organisations to ensure that the subsequent shifts/opportunities are high quality and worthwhile.

It has been identified as an important factor that organisations working with volunteers through the programme recognise and value their role.

“We’ve heard it time and time again from volunteers that they still feel really valued and they still feel part of the family and they’re looked after, I would say that’s one of the main successes of the transition is that we’ve gone from being really transactional and having all this resource to look after them really well, but we’ve scaled down massively, and successfully changed the mindset of volunteers and we’ve held onto that feeling.”

Valuing volunteers



"Absolutely Cultured demonstrates a strong commitment to involving volunteers from all backgrounds and its volunteer team is reflective of the communities in which it works."

-Investing in Volunteers Report, 2019

Access to training is not the only way that volunteers are shown appreciation. Other formal and informal mechanisms include:

- celebration events;
- attendance at a range of Absolutely Cultured meetings;
- being routinely thanked at the end of each volunteering session;
- 'thank you' cards;
- certificates;
- feedback and support from staff members.

Feedback and review is integral to Absolutely Cultured and volunteers are widely consulted on the development of the Volunteer Programme on an ongoing basis. This includes gathering ideas from volunteers directly and collating information collected from depth interviews, evaluations and an annual survey - formal and informal feedback and reports are all used to help develop the Volunteer Programme.

"We are a volunteer-centric organisation, that's why we have Volunteer Voice where staff and volunteers can discuss where the Volunteer Programme is heading"

- Volunteer Programme Team

Communication is recognised as being fundamental to volunteer satisfaction and the team have established multiple channels to facilitate these conversations, shown opposite.

Volunteers are able to contribute their ideas and concerns about everything from specific volunteering and training opportunities, to the structure of the organisation and the strategic direction of the programme.

"There's always someone we can contact - support and communication is excellent, if there wasn't good support I wouldn't volunteer"

- Volunteer

Volunteer Voice

A group consisting of Absolutely Cultured volunteers called Volunteer Voice has been set up to represent volunteers in consultations about the future of the programme.

Updates

Volunteers receive information & updates regularly through Better Impact, the website, meetings, reviews, events, consultations, by email, post, text messages and phone calls.

Open-door policy

Programme Managers strive to build positive relationships with volunteers and provide multiple platforms for them to share ideas, queries or concerns.

Investing in Volunteers



The quality and value of the Volunteer Programme has been recognised in the renewal of the Investing in Volunteers kitemark originally awarded in 2017, an independent assessment based on 9 key indicators of good practice.

With the aim of providing a positive and enriching experience for all volunteers, the team ensures that opportunities are diverse and high-quality by working closely with a network of host organisations. Each host is subject to a vetting procedure and receive a full briefing on the programme before undertaking comprehensive volunteer management training.

Volunteers are given a high level of flexibility around the shifts they choose, depending on their availability and wider interests. This is co-ordinated through a centralised online management system (Better Impacts) ensuring fair and equal access to all opportunities.

Expectations of volunteers are set out clearly in the Volunteer Handbook, which provides information and guidance on all aspects of the role, whilst the rights of volunteers are enshrined in formal policies and procedures which are periodically reviewed and updated in line with employment law.

At the heart of the Volunteer Programme is the idea that volunteering should be accessible to everyone, regardless of age, background or disability. This is reflected in the Volunteer Handbook, which highlights the programme’s commitment to diversity and inclusion, and offers guidance on positive communication and respect for LGBTQ+ communities.

Training and development opportunities continue to be a key component of the programme. Core training introduces a number of policies to the volunteers, such as safeguarding adults, confidentiality, code of conduct, lone working and risk assessments. Volunteers have been unanimously positive about the quality of their training.

Alongside role and venue-specific training, volunteers can also take part in Masterclasses to enhance their skills and knowledge in a wide range of topic areas. Since the start of 2018 over 320 Masterclasses have been held, in recognition of the value of upskilling and empowering volunteers.

Whilst research has shown that Masterclasses are not a critical factor in the retention of volunteers, there is consensus that they help volunteers to feel valued and appreciated. Furthermore, other outcomes – such as new skills & knowledge, and improved physical and mental health – contribute to a happier, more knowledgeable and motivated volunteer workforce.

	85%	72%	68%	61%	56%
As a direct result of attending Masterclasses	...learnt new skills	...increased general knowledge	...increased knowledge of Hull	...increased interest in new ideas & experiences	...felt a greater sense of belonging to the Volunteer Programme

Source: Masterclass Survey 2019 (n=101)

The role of Masterclasses



Masterclasses were identified as an important component for volunteer engagement.

Designed to supplement core training and role & venue specific training, the Masterclasses became an integral and valued part of the Volunteer Programme in 2017. To ensure their long-term sustainability, the team adapted the model in 2018: rather than relying solely on external providers, volunteers were encouraged to share their skills, knowledge and passions by delivering Masterclasses themselves.

Alongside the extensive training and varied shift opportunities, the series of Masterclasses clearly play an important role in enhancing the experience of volunteers, introducing them to a wide range of topics and issues, many of which are connected to – and therefore enhance – the roles they perform as volunteers.

Organisations and charities are regularly given exposure through Masterclasses to raise awareness of their aims and encourage volunteers to get involved in wider opportunities. This new approach – as well as reaching out to volunteers to deliver Masterclasses themselves - has enabled this aspect to continue at an affordable level.

According to volunteers themselves, Masterclasses have been both inspiring and informative, in some cases leading to serious hobbies or interests in the topics presented. Overwhelmingly there is a sense that they have helped to improve their knowledge of Hull, which of course is invaluable in their role as ambassadors for the city.

Masterclasses have also helped establish a strong and supportive volunteering community - or 'family' - by bringing individuals together without the formality attached to an official volunteering role.

“That extra knowledge, it just makes you feel so good about yourself, your self-esteem and your emotional wellbeing gets a boost because of that extra input.”

“The Masterclasses I attended at the beginning were at the university and by going there I found out about other things, like the book club and the culture café, so that prompted me to do that. A good Masterclass can lead you onto something else, but not necessarily more of what you did, it can send you off in another direction.”

“It brings us together. Often as a volunteer, even if you’re on the same shift, you’re not able to talk. You meet people in a different situation and that’s rather nice. It brings that family feeling together.”

“That added to the initial training we had as volunteers around inclusion, we got a smattering and an awareness-raising there, but by doing the Masterclasses it bolts on a bit more each time.”

- Volunteers

Personal benefits



Volunteers have reported a wide range of benefits as a direct result of volunteering with Absolutely Cultured, an experience which has enhanced their personal and professional skills, widened their social networks, and boosted their confidence and self-esteem levels. The broadening of shift opportunities, the addition of social action projects and the continuation of the Masterclass programme ensures that volunteers can take part in a variety of activity, leading to high levels of enjoyment.

The evaluation of the Social Action projects has found that volunteer-led community activity can make even greater contributions to the wellbeing, social connectedness and personal development of volunteers. Furthermore, it has enabled volunteers to do more meaningful volunteering activity and to perform this activity well through the ongoing learning experience that it has offered.

“I was the type of person who couldn't go anywhere on my own, and I knew that if I did this, I would have to make that step and go out there on my own and meet people and talk to people I never would, and it's worked. I got more confidence.” – Volunteer

Evidence suggests that the programme has also acted as a springboard to find other volunteering opportunities or increase the frequency of volunteering. In the most recent survey of volunteers, 60% of respondents said they had volunteered for other organisations since joining the programme, and 31% had been introduced to them through their role with Absolutely Cultured.

“A lot of our volunteers are Absolutely Cultured volunteers. Because they've been coming to the theatre, they've seen that we have our own volunteers as well, and the ones that are really interested in theatre then become a Hull Truck Theatre volunteer as well. But [if the programme stopped] we would lose that presence and that link to the great things that happened in 2017” – Volunteer Host Organisation

As a direct result of volunteering...	57%	86%	57%	96%	70%	65%
	...increased self-confidence	...had learnt new skills	...increased life satisfaction	...enjoyed their experience	...felt more connected to Hull's community	...had developed new or existing relationships
SOURCE: Wave 5 volunteer midpoint survey 2019 (n=53)				SOURCE: NESTA Social Action Project Evaluation (n=48)		

9. Covid-19



The impact of the pandemic



As we entered into 2020, changes had been made to the staffing structure, the team was operating with fewer roles and was in the process of implementing the transition plan including the increased role of volunteers in supporting delivery.

There was confidence in local authority funding for the programme which would enable its continuation beyond 2020.

The plan was impacted heavily by the pandemic in 2020/21 which saw changes to the volunteering landscape and changes to the immediate funding landscape, but it also brought a renewed interest in the role volunteers can play, an increase in community spirit and a different demographic of volunteer.

The pandemic impacted on the organisation's financial future as planned funding applications couldn't be progressed, with many funders diverting funds to existing organisations and Covid emergency relief.

The local authority was no longer in a position to commit to funding. This threatened the continuation of the programme, particularly within Absolutely Cultured.

Whilst this was taking place, the Volunteer Programme was called upon to contribute to the city's emergency response.

The COVID-19 response



In response to the coronavirus pandemic, the Volunteer Programme worked with Hull City Council alongside organisations within the VCS sector to assist those who were self isolating in terms of food and medication delivery and welfare checks.

Volunteers staffed a telephone befriending service to support those who were lonely and isolated due to the pandemic, named after the Volunteer Programme initiative 'Chatty Hull' which had a similar aim: to get people talking.

Feedback indicates that the emergency response effort has been mutually beneficial to both volunteers and residents (see below). Volunteers report it has given them a purpose during uncertain and often lonely times and, in some cases, opened their eyes to the needs of local communities.

Bringing together a variety of VCS groups to deal with the crisis has also facilitated new partnerships and improved working relationships for the Volunteer Programme Team, who have been given a platform to share expertise and learning with others, and demonstrate that the programme can – and is willing to – support other organisations across the city.

Volunteers contributed over **3,100 volunteer hours** to the response efforts. In addition, volunteers supported their communities directly, through other organisations and we are currently promoting vaccination volunteering through the programme which is being delivered by HEY Smile Foundation.

More information on Covid response learning can be found in the additional learning log.

79%	87%	84%
...agreed that it had benefited them as well as the people they have supported	...felt proud to have supported Hull's emergency response effort	...felt useful during the crisis
SOURCE: COVID-19 Emergency Response Volunteer Feedback (n=93)		

Impact on volunteering and partnerships



Faced with the challenges brought on by Covid-19, Absolutely Cultured began discussions with partner organisations, including in the VCS sector to explore an alternative plan for volunteering outside of Absolutely Cultured.

The Covid response from local charities, VCS organisations and volunteers had exposed some weaknesses in infrastructure and capacity but had also reignited the discussion around the value of a city-wide volunteering offer and a more joined up and influential charity and VCS sector.

It has also highlighted the importance of joined up cross sector working as well as the role of the local authorities in realising plans for volunteering.

A cross sector task and finish group was implemented and Absolutely Cultured took part, as part of a broader VCS reset project called: *Building Forward Together*. The group have made recommendations on the future of volunteering amongst other areas that Covid-19 response has highlighted.

Absolutely Cultured is currently in discussions with partners including the local authority to position the Volunteer Programme in a different organisation, supported by Hull and East Riding local authority funding and capacity.

Wider sector organisations will continue to engage with each other via the cross sector working group to realise a vision for volunteering that will benefit Hull and East Riding.

“I think COVID has been a bit of a turning point, what’s happened through the pandemic is that orgs have been put together that wouldn’t normally work together. It laid bare some of the weaknesses in the city, but I think it’s also created greater awareness of the assets that we have in Hull and East Riding that could be so much better with stronger relationships and infrastructure– it’s broken down barriers and opened up the dialogue.”

“We’ve developed some really key cross sector partnerships through the work during the pandemic. I don’t think that would have happened pre-COVID or it would have been challenging.”

- Volunteer Programme and Absolutely Cultured Team

Impact on Social Action volunteering



Prior to Covid, plans were in place to further develop social action whilst aligning the role of the projects with wider plans to increase access to culture within communities.

Through discussions with partners about relocating the city-wide programme, it became clear that this element would be best placed remaining within Absolutely Cultured.

Absolutely Cultured has now secured funding from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to further develop social action and increase cultural activity within communities.

The role of volunteers will continue to be essential to plans and the organisation will work closely with the new volunteer programme host organisation to ensure a strong partnership is in place to enable volunteers to be core to future social action activities.

“I have realised the extent of communities who are very close by who are severely disadvantaged in terms of health and disability, unemployment, poverty and loneliness. Going forward, I am going to be more inclined to sign up to shifts that directly help people and the communities. I have witnessed people who are really struggling...I was switched off to it, now I am definitely not.”

- Volunteer

Summary & Conclusions



Summary of evaluation findings



Nobody could have predicted the impact of Covid-19 but given the timing of the programme's stage of development the impact was significant and led to a complete rethink of plans. However, the experience of partners during the pandemic has stimulated a new potential for the programme and for volunteering in the city.

The Volunteer Programme has moved from a transactional model towards a people-powered movement, though there is still progress to make. Utilising the skills, experience and expertise of volunteers, the team have managed to scale down operations whilst retaining the essence of what has made the programme so successful – i.e. a structured system of high quality training and opportunities for volunteers with a focus on supporting arts and culture in the city – leading to far greater potential for long-term sustainability.

Operating on a smaller budget has, of course, also been challenging for staff, who have continued to balance the needs of the programme, its partners, funders, and the volunteers themselves. Looking forward, there is recognition of the importance of ongoing recruitment in targeting underrepresented demographics and freshening the pool of volunteers more generally, yet there is also some concern about the resource and capacity required to do this effectively.

Whilst it has been a long process to develop and refine the new volunteering model, and this will evolve further should it continue, there is a feeling that ongoing consultation and communication with volunteers has been successful in securing their support and insight during this period of transformation. It has also helped reduce costs by identifying the inherent strengths and weaknesses of the programme.

Summary of evaluation findings



The Volunteer Programme has attempted to expand its remit by working with partners beyond just the culture sector, but this has been limited by a significant reduction in funding and resources. Nevertheless, an increasingly diverse array of opportunities beyond simply events and arts projects has become integral to the satisfaction and retention of volunteers.

Since using volunteers, host organisations reported that they were able to deliver bigger and more ambitious projects, enabling them to reach and engage with communities in a far more meaningful and cost-effective way. Their overall experience of working with the team is overwhelmingly positive despite the staff and organisational changes.

The quality and value of the Volunteering Programme has been recognised in the Investing in Volunteers kitemark, an independent assessment based on 9 key indicators of good practice. The systems and procedures in place ensure that volunteers are kept safe, informed and able to contribute their own ideas and suggestions about all aspects of the Volunteer Programme.

Despite concerns about the Volunteer Programme monopolising volunteers in the city, feedback suggests that it has acted as a catalyst for individuals to take on more and varied opportunities. It has also reaffirmed their commitment to volunteering and encouraged them to access more varied opportunities.

60% of volunteers have volunteered elsewhere since joining the programme, and 43% would NOT have volunteered elsewhere if they hadn't volunteered with Absolutely Cultured.

Over 3,100 volunteer hours has been dedicated to COVID-19 emergency support with volunteers supporting those who were self isolating in terms of food and medication delivery and welfare checks. 79% volunteers have reported wellbeing benefits for themselves and those they have supported, and many feel more aware of the needs of vulnerable members of the community.

The resource provided by the Volunteer Programme during the pandemic has also given staff the opportunity to build and repair relationships with other organisations in the city by dispelling some common misconceptions and concerns, and demonstrating the value of a central volunteering programme.

Summary of evaluation findings



As of April 2021, 2,428 volunteers are still part of the programme, and despite a significant reduction in opportunities due to the pandemic and some uncertainty how many will continue as activity resumes, around 1,000 of those were actively engaging with the programme in the last 12 months.

Targeted recruitment has effectively increased the number of under 25s becoming volunteers, yet there is concern about the lack of resources to continue with this approach.

Individuals continue to volunteer with the programme as a way to support culture in the city. The link to 2017 is also a strong pull factor, yet this presents a challenge to the team in terms of looking forwards.

The quality of training and volunteering shifts continues to be a major reason why volunteers choose to stay with the Volunteer Programme, alongside the sense of belonging, the connection to 2017, Masterclasses and feeling valued.

Masterclasses continue to play an important role in setting the Volunteer Programme apart and keeping the volunteers happy and engaged. As a result of attending Masterclasses:

- 85% learnt new skills
- 72% increased general knowledge
- 68% increased knowledge of Hull
- 61% increased interest in new ideas and experiences
- 56% felt a greater sense of belonging to the Volunteer Programme

As a result of volunteering:



96% enjoyed their experience



86% learnt new skills



79% increased their engagement level with the community of Hull



70% felt more connected to the city



65% developed new or existing relationships



63% felt like they had more of a stake in society



61% felt they can now take action to improve their local community



57% increased life satisfaction



57% increased self confidence

Summary of evaluation findings



There is no blueprint to a successful volunteering mega event legacy, though many of the successful programme components can be done more cost effectively and we've maintained the majority through different creative approaches.

Continued support of partners and hosts is critical but also challenging to maintain with limited resource and without an established infrastructure that the City of Culture project provided.

There was a significant mindset shift required by volunteers as well as the team to adapt to a different way of doing things and to manage expectations of continued momentum. To build on the shift in momentum into something different, with a different energy and sustainable.

“It’s about consulting the volunteers and testing things out. We know that the celebration events are really important for the reward and recognition of volunteers, and the last Christmas one we did was at the fraction of the budget, a tiny amount compared to previous years, and it went really well. We know that it’s really important but we know that it can be done cheaper.”

“It’s helped us to be more creative, like with the reward and recognition, it’s made us consider what we can do that’s cheap but still meaningful.”

- Volunteer Programme & Absolutely Cultured Team

Summary of evaluation findings



City of Culture DNA

Whilst the programme still has potential to broaden out beyond culture, retaining the cultural DNA, volunteers role in supporting communities such as through Social Action projects and the parts of the programme which set it aside from others such as the engagement of volunteers and Masterclasses are all essential components to retain. This was identified as necessary for sustainability by volunteers.

Programme identity

Understanding what gives the programme its identity is important. Whether that be uniform or other ways that reinforce a sense of identity.

It is recognised that a balance needs to be struck around uniform, utilising it when it is valuable but being flexible when other solutions are better.

A visual identity and effective marketing of the programme that ensures it retains a strong sense of identity is important. In this instance, identifying a new name for the programme which enables it to be forward looking but recognises its DNA