



THE STORY OF OUR VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

Reflecting on the Volunteer Programme journey from its origins
with **Hull UK City of Culture 2017** to **HEY! Volunteering**

HEY! Volunteering in partnership with



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For more information about HEY! Volunteering visit www.heyvolunteering.co.uk or contact us on hello@heyvolunteering.co.uk

FOREWORD

As our grant funding concludes, at Spirit of 2012 we have been reflecting on the journey that the Hull volunteering programme has been on since it was established as a pilot back in 2016. Far from fizzling out after playing a core part in such a spectacular City of Culture year in 2017, we are delighted with how it has thrived to become the joyous and well-respected programme that it is today. The region has embraced 'Hull and East Yorkshire's Big Blue Wave of Positivity', and its longevity is a testament to the support from the community, the team behind it all, and of course, the heart and soul of it, the volunteers themselves.

Having seen what an intrinsic part the volunteers played in Hull 2017, and how visible their presence continued to be in the city afterwards, the potential of the programme to seed a lasting legacy for the people of Hull was clear to us at Spirit of 2012. The evaluation from Hull 2017 showed significant impact on the volunteers and an increase in pride in the city. It captured Hull's enthusiasm for participation and a desire to continue to get involved. More than 2,500 people volunteered for Hull 2017, but without a large programme of regular cultural events, it can be a challenge to continue the momentum after an event and keep volunteers engaged, trained, valued and happy. We understood that significant, long-term investment was needed to make this happen and our legacy funding supported the team with the time and space to secure further funding and explore what a sustainable and inclusive model could look like.

Now in 2024 we see a continued appetite for people to serve their fellow citizens as 'HEY! Volunteers'. Volunteers have given over 337,000 hours of their time to support cultural events across Hull and East Yorkshire. The feedback we've had from volunteers, from formal reports, but also just from getting out and about in Hull and speaking with them, has shown how impactful the volunteering programme has been for so many. The case studies in the report demonstrate this well and we know there are many more stories yet to be told as HEY! continues to expand into East Yorkshire. As Spirit funding ceases and we look to close in early 2026 we wish them very well for a long and impactful future!



Jane, Lady Gibson OBE
Spirit of 2012 Chair



INTRODUCTION

The Hull Volunteer Programme's journey from its origins in the City of Culture 2017 to its reimagining as HEY! Volunteering reflects a remarkable evolution in both purpose and scope. Launched in 2016 to support Hull's year as the UK City of Culture, the programme quickly became an iconic symbol of the celebrations. It embodied the city's enthusiasm for participation, showcasing Hull's community spirit as volunteers stepped up to support a wide range of cultural activities and events.

The Hull 2017 cultural programme was a £32.8m project which included events and activities directly commissioned by Hull 2017 Ltd, as well as those produced by existing arts and cultural organisations in Hull, and through a grant funding initiative, the Creative Communities Programme.

It is no exaggeration to say that the volunteers were at the heart of it – supporting, galvanising, promoting and celebrating the city, its communities and visitors. However, as 2017 came to a close, questions arose about the future of the Volunteer Programme. Would it survive without the investment, infrastructure and momentum initiated by the City of Culture?

Yet, there was a clear desire for the programme to continue, serving as a lasting symbol of Hull's cultural renaissance. This is the story of how the Volunteer Programme not only survived but thrived, evolving into its current form as HEY! Volunteering, managed through the Local Visitor Economy Partnership. To highlight this journey, we share the personal stories of three volunteers, each representing a different phase of this remarkable transformation.

EVOLUTION OF THE HULL VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

2016



Volunteer Programme established, Pioneer Volunteers recruited and deployed

2017



Volunteers support vast cultural programme

2018



Absolutely Cultured established, Volunteer Programme moves with it

2019



Volunteer Programme explores new areas of work and develops new partnerships

2020



Volunteers deployed to support emergency response to pandemic

2021



Period of consultation and rebuild post-pandemic. Volunteer Programme moves to local authority

2022



Growth and development of programme, embedding the HEY! Volunteering brand

2023



Continued growth and diversification of opportunities, including exploratory project around coastal heritage

2024



New projects, initiatives and funding relationships, including the establishment of HEY! Brid

2025



Further growth into East Yorkshire, introduction of HEY! Goole and partnerships with Hull College



ORIGINS: CITY OF CULTURE 2017

The Hull Volunteer Programme was officially launched on 9 March 2016 as part of the Hull UK City of Culture 2017 project. The purpose of the programme was to support and elevate the events and activities that were planned through the cultural programme, with a broader vision 'to nurture a sense of belonging and ownership amongst the communities delivering Hull's UK City of Culture year.'

Spirit of 2012 was the primary funder of the Volunteer Programme, providing a grant of £2.85m to Hull 2017 Culture Company in October 2014. This investment not only jumpstarted the programme but also attracted additional funding and sponsorships from other sources.

Volunteers became a defining symbol of the year's success, easily recognisable in their distinctive blue uniforms. More than 2,500 individuals participated, performing a wide range of roles from visitor welcome, exhibition guides, event marshals, and community engagement facilitators, offering support to both local and international visitors.

4,356 applications
to become a City of Culture
volunteer



2,488 volunteers
were inducted and trained

Volunteers undertook
84,000 shifts
& delivered
337,000 hours'
worth of volunteering



The programme's organisation and positive impact on the community were widely praised, as volunteers played a critical role in helping Hull achieve its City of Culture goals. Their efforts showcased the city's cultural vibrancy and bolstered its reputation on a national and international stage. Drawing inspiration from other large-scale events such as the London 2012 Olympic Games' 'Games Makers' and the 'Tour Makers' of the Tour de Yorkshire, Hull's Volunteer Programme embraced best practices in volunteer engagement, elevating the quality of both the volunteer experience and management approach.

The Volunteer Programme benefited from significant investment through the City of Culture company, and a large, experienced management team consisting of 12-15 individuals at any one time. The volunteer journey was carefully planned, encompassing recruitment, selection, training, and ongoing engagement opportunities. Once individuals completed core training and passed a background check by Humberside Police, they officially became part of the programme. This journey was managed in phases, beginning with a pilot group known as the "Pioneer Volunteers" and followed by four main waves of recruitment and engagement.

The structured approach ensured the programme maintained momentum while managing volunteer attrition throughout the year. This focus on volunteer experience and support contributed to the programme's long-term success, leaving a lasting legacy for Hull and its communities.

There was an intention from the beginning that the programme would continue beyond 2017:

"The programme would create a world-class volunteering community in the city, who were networked and engaged, and who had developed the necessary skills, knowledge and experience to support the cultural sector and city in 2017 and beyond. In short, the Volunteer Programme would be resilient and sustainable – a true legacy of Hull UK City of Culture."

**Volunteer Programme Evaluation Report,
Hull UK City of Culture 2017**



CASE STUDY: SUZELLA

Background and Inspiration

Suzella is a current HEY! Volunteer who joined as a Wave 1 Volunteer in 2016. Prior to this she worked as a Games-Maker Team Leader during the 2012 London Olympics and had volunteered at the Rugby World Cup and Tour de France, developing a passion for volunteering at large-scale sporting events.

Involvement with the Hull City of Culture 2017

Suzella moved to Hull after reconnecting with her father in 2012, just before Hull's announcement as the UK City of Culture for 2017. Although initially from London, she quickly fell in love with Hull and was excited by the opportunity to transform the city's much-maligned reputation. The Volunteer Programme provided the perfect opportunity to contribute to this transformation, and her experience, passion and dedication to volunteering made her the perfect fit.

Suzella recalls the City of Culture being a transformative time for Hull, with large-scale events and art installations bringing new energy and cultural vibrancy to public spaces. Her role as a volunteer gave her purpose and a sense of responsibility for the good things that were happening in the city, boosting her self-esteem and heightening her sense of civic pride.



Challenges and Triumphs

Volunteering also provided Suzella with personal growth opportunities. Due to ill health she was forced to stop work and give up her sporting hobbies, which took a significant toll on her physical and mental health. However, the opportunities provided through the City of Culture Volunteer Programme and Masterclasses, opened up new pathways for self-expression through arts and crafts. The discovery of her creative side provided a much-needed alternative outlet, providing Suzella with a coping mechanism and allowing her to channel her energy and creativity into visual arts. Soon Suzella became involved with two disability art groups, and her artwork has been displayed on multiple occasions.

“The amount of opportunities that have come from volunteering has really enriched my life, knowing that I can still do something that’s going to benefit me. Before I got ill my special interest was sports - everything I did was sports - and so when I had to stop all of that I had to find myself again. I still grieve my old life in the sense of not being able to do sports anymore, but it was through volunteering that I actually got into arts and crafts, and now I’m involved in two disability art groups. I’ve had my work on display a number of times in the last couple of years. None of that would have been possible without the City of Culture and the Volunteer Programme.”

Without the routine of full-time work, volunteering was also a source of motivation and purpose for Suzella, who came to rely on the welcoming and inclusive environment that the programme provided.

The diverse range of shift and training opportunities provided by the Volunteer Programme has also given Suzella the chance to push herself out of her comfort zone. An example of this was her participation in a catwalk performance, something she never would have considered before.

The Management Team were particularly accommodating to Suzella’s needs and ensured that she was able to participate in as many opportunities as possible, despite her increasing physical limitations. Her caregiver was also brought on as a volunteer, allowing them to work together during events. The commitment to accessibility was reflected by the team’s willingness to incorporate Suzella’s suggestions, adding details about accessibility to each volunteer shift opportunity on Better Impact.

Suzella also talked about the impact of volunteering on her husband, who joined the programme recently and has experienced significant improvements in his mental health. Their shared participation in volunteer work brought them closer and gave their lives renewed purpose and fulfilment.



Role in Accessibility Advocacy

As Suzella's involvement with Hull's cultural events grew, so did her advocacy for accessibility. Through her connections in the volunteering community, she played a key role in making Hull's Freedom Festival more accessible for people with mobility issues. She recalls working with the festival organisers to install barriers and designate spaces for wheelchair users, which led to the most accessible Freedom Festival to date.

Suzella's passion for improving accessibility extended beyond individual events. She proposed ideas for making the region's public spaces more accessible, including adding wooden boards on beaches for wheelchair users and improving pathways in local parks. Her vision for Hull is to highlight it as a model for accessibility, attracting tourism and enhancing the city's inclusivity.

"When I first started volunteering I wasn't using any aids, and then I went into a wheelchair in 2018, and I went into a powerchair quite soon after that. But even from the beginning, they took my carer on as a volunteer so that she could help me in those shifts and push me around. After that I was always asking whether shifts were accessible so they put it on the job description. So now, if there's any accessibility issues, they'll let you know in the description."



Transition to Absolutely Cultured

As the Volunteer Programme evolved from City of Culture to Absolutely Cultured and, later, HEY! Volunteering, Suzella noticed shifts in the size of the team and the scope of events. However, she praised the continuity of the programme's values, emphasising how volunteers continue to be treated with respect and appreciation. Despite a reduction in large-scale events, she and many others found fulfilment in smaller, more regular opportunities, illustrating that volunteering can cater to a range of preferences and schedules.

Despite ongoing health concerns, including mobility issues and other challenges due to a weak immune system and pain, the flexibility of the current programme allows Suzella to volunteer regularly, and without pressure. This flexible approach has been crucial in maintaining their mental health and enabling them to stay active despite their physical limitations. The team's efforts to ensure inclusivity, such as accommodating requests for wheelchair access, tailoring uniforms to meet health needs, and offering free tickets and special offers, further reinforces Suzella's positive volunteer experience.

Reflection on Legacy and Sustainability

Suzella is full of praise for the Volunteer Programme, particularly its ability to adapt and become self-sustainable, attracting volunteers from younger generations who were too young to participate in 2017 and diversifying into other geographical regions and areas of work. She feels the value of the programme lies in its inclusivity and its focus on providing positive outlets for people from all walks of life, including those with disabilities. The ongoing involvement of volunteers in strategic decision-making has also been critical in making the programme relevant, appealing and accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds.

"I think a lot of it is the fact that we get incentives like masterclasses and celebration events, so we feel appreciated. And if there's any concerns, we know we can easily just talk to any other members and staff, I think everyone feels comfortable that way too. And our opinion is valued."

TRANSITION TO ABSOLUTELY CULTURED

The Hull UK City of Culture programme had showcased the region's rich culture, history, and heritage, elevating the city's national and international reputation. It exceeded all expectations, driven in large part by substantial funding that flowed through the Hull 2017 organisation and directly to local cultural institutions. The success of the year-long programme sparked a widespread appetite for more, with culture seen as a catalyst for long-lasting change. As the year concluded, there was a strong desire to maintain this momentum and continue building on Hull's cultural regeneration.

Central to this movement was the Volunteer Programme, which had shown the power of grassroots support in driving cultural and community engagement. Thousands of volunteers played a key role in the success of 2017, fuelling expectations for a lasting legacy. With the end of City of Culture year, it was recognised that the city Volunteer Programme would need to adapt from focusing on arts and culture and being largely events-driven; a broader approach would be needed if the programme was to remain. This was about learning and adapting, trying new approaches, and developing an understanding of the programme's new scope and purpose.



FORMATION OF ABSOLUTELY CULTURED

Building on the successes of 2017, Absolutely Cultured was established in 2018 as a successor organisation and registered charity. Its mission was to maintain Hull's cultural momentum, with a particular emphasis on preserving the Volunteer Programme as a key part of the city's cultural legacy.

Legacy funding supported the organisation's first three years, allowing it to develop sustainable models and secure additional resources for future initiatives. In April 2018, a £600,000 grant from Spirit of 2012 secured the future of the Volunteer Programme and ensured it remained a key part of ongoing cultural development.

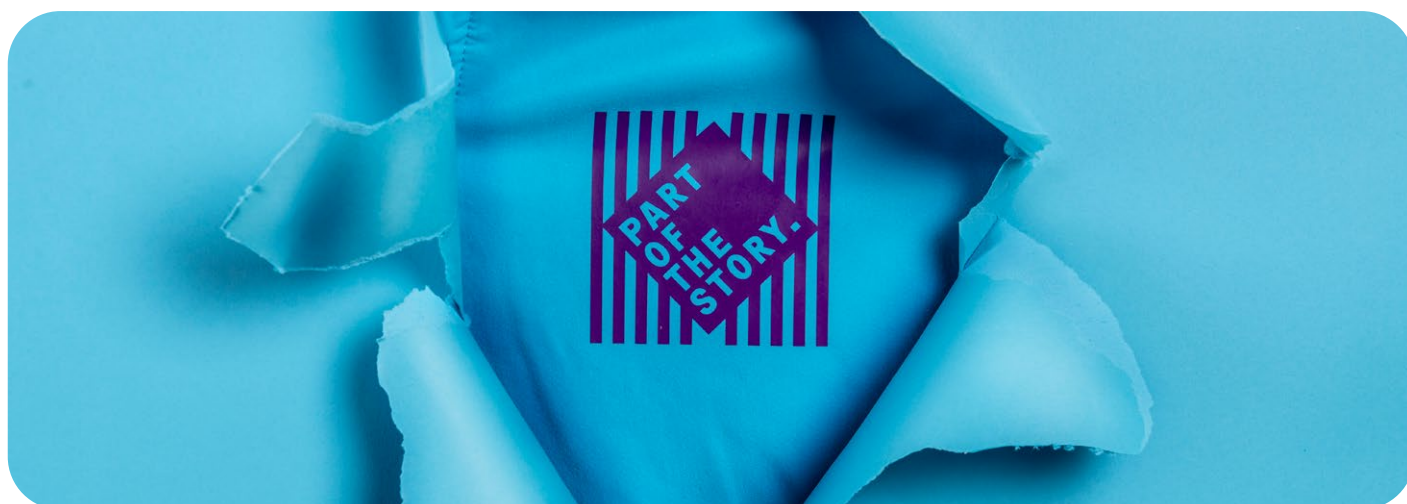
THE VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME'S EVOLUTION

The Hull 2017 Volunteer Programme had been designed to make volunteering accessible and attractive to a wide range of people. By placing volunteers' needs, motivations, and circumstances at its heart, the programme broke down barriers – both real and perceived – that often prevent people from volunteering. The programme offered flexible, varied, and rewarding opportunities, allowing individuals to commit as much or as little time as they wished, and participate in ways that suited their comfort levels. This flexibility helped create a large, diverse pool of volunteers who could be readily engaged for new opportunities.

The success of the programme was fuelled by the high-quality, fulfilling experiences it provided, encouraging volunteers to stay engaged and participate in different roles. The massive investment around the City of Culture year, combined with the event's strong pull, created a "catalyst moment" for volunteering in Hull, sparking widespread interest and allowing for the piloting of innovative approaches to volunteer management.

As the Volunteer Programme transitioned under the stewardship of Absolutely Cultured, it faced the challenge of operating on a significantly reduced budget. However, with a smaller but experienced management team – many of whom had been integral to the success of the original programme – Absolutely Cultured was able to draw on previous lessons, skills, and knowledge to guide the programme's evolution. Despite these constraints, the Volunteer Programme continued to thrive, cementing its role in Hull's cultural legacy and adapting to a new phase of growth.

An important element of work during this period was building better relationships with infrastructure organisations and existing volunteer networks in the city, articulating the Volunteer Programme's mission to support and enhance existing volunteering efforts in the city, and dispelling the myth that everyone was competing for the same small pool of volunteer resource.



THE NESTA SOCIAL ACTION PROJECT

A major strand of work for the Volunteer Programme during this period was the Nesta Social Action project, a two-year research and development (R&D) project to gather knowledge and test ideas for the diversification of the Hull 2017 Volunteer Programme into a city Volunteer Programme that put volunteer-led community activity at its heart.

The project was split into three stages:

1 Understand

Volunteers and the team at Absolutely Cultured to undertake community asset and social capital asset mapping, with support from public service organisations, to increase understanding of the gaps in provision and to highlight the most isolated individuals and communities in the city.

2 Learning

Train volunteers to talk to communities across Hull, and support these volunteers to design and deliver five pilot activities based on the results of these conversations, which would test approaches for the core engagement activity in Phase Two.

3 Engage

Utilise the understanding and learning from Phase One to design and deliver two large-scale engagement activities targeting areas of most need.

The project resulted in five pilot activities and three large-scale community engagement activities: Chatty Hull, The Shires and Peel Street Park.

Whilst the project was severely disrupted by the pandemic, evaluation of the project showed a range of positive outcomes on the health and wellbeing of volunteers, residents and communities, further enhancing the experience of the volunteers and developing their skills in community engagement and advocacy.



COVID-19 RESPONSE

The pandemic impacted on Absolutely Cultured and the Volunteer Programme significantly. Planned funding applications couldn't be progressed as many funders diverted support to existing organisations and Covid-19 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. As part of the city's coordinated efforts, many volunteers from the programme shifted their focus to provide vital assistance to communities in need.

Key ways the programme contributed include:

- 1 Community Support**
Volunteers helped deliver essential services to vulnerable residents, such as delivering food, medication, and other necessities to people who were shielding or unable to leave their homes.
- 2 Welfare Checks**
Volunteers conducted welfare phone calls to isolated individuals, offering emotional support, checking on their wellbeing, and ensuring they had access to resources during lockdowns and periods of isolation.
- 3 Supporting Healthcare Efforts**
Some volunteers assisted in administrative roles to support healthcare operations, including staffing COVID-19 testing sites, vaccination centres, and providing logistical help where needed.
- 4 Information Sharing**
Volunteers helped distribute key public health information, ensuring that communities were informed about local services, guidelines, and safety measures during the pandemic.

More than 3,100 volunteer hours were delivered as part of the emergency response. The programme's adaptability and strong community connections were pivotal during the crisis, allowing it to quickly mobilise volunteers to address emerging needs and support the most vulnerable members of society.



KEY DEVELOPMENTS

Despite fewer large-scale cultural events, the volunteering experience remained largely intact during this period. Volunteers kept their distinctive blue uniform, core staff were retained, Better Impact was still used to manage volunteer shifts, and the Rewards and Recognition system (including Masterclasses) remained in place albeit on a slightly reduced scale. However, some of the more significant developments during this period included:

- Moving premises from Hull's High Street (where the 2017 offices were located) to Humber Street Gallery;
- Reducing the size of the management team from 12–15 staff in 2017/18 to just a handful of staff during this period (dependant on projects like Nesta Social Action);
- Broadening the scope of volunteer opportunities beyond just arts and culture and new connections were developed with host organisations in other sectors;
- Diversifying funding streams, leading to new projects such as the Nesta Social Action project (see case study);
- Building better relationships with existing volunteer networks to maximise volunteering efforts across the region and dispel myths about the Volunteer Programme's mission;
- Renewing the Investing in Volunteers kitemark;
- Streamlining the recruitment and onboarding process to become more cost-effective whilst retaining robust vetting processes and extensive training;
- Introducing a buddy system to provide additional support to volunteers, particularly those who may need extra assistance to fully participate in volunteering activities. This system pairs experienced volunteers, known as buddies, with newer or less confident volunteers, offering guidance, encouragement, and practical help as they navigate their volunteering roles;
- Adapting the Masterclass system to be more cost-effective as volunteers were invited to share their own skills and expertise with others, rather than always bringing in external providers;
- Testing various recruitment strategies to engage HTR communities and diversify volunteer demographics.



CASE STUDY: DAVID

David began his volunteer journey in 2018, shortly after Hull's celebrated year as the UK City of Culture in 2017. He had previously observed the joy and engagement of the volunteers during the City of Culture events and was inspired to join. As someone who had worked remotely for years, David wanted to push himself out of his comfort zone, meet new people, and contribute to his hometown. He embarked on a year where he said "yes" to everything, taking part in diverse experiences, from film extras to various local cultural projects.

The Onboarding Process

Whilst recounting his skills and professional experience during his recruitment interview, David was pleasantly surprised to learn that he had more to offer the programme than he had first thought. This was followed by a pub quiz aimed at fostering camaraderie among the volunteers while testing their knowledge of Hull. Through this quiz and other induction activities, David learned more about Hull's rich history and culture – despite having lived there his entire life, there were aspects he had not fully appreciated. His induction was a pivotal point in building lasting connections, including a friendship with Ray Stephens, an older volunteer with whom he shared many experiences.

"It surprised me how little I knew about the city given that I'd lived here my entire life. I actually did really well at the pub quiz the following year when I was helping out with recruitment! But that wasn't because the answers were the same, it was because I'd built up more knowledge of the city through volunteering."

Motivation and Impact

David's decision to volunteer was largely driven by a desire to improve the city's reputation, which he felt was unfairly tarnished by negative media portrayals, especially after Hull's City of Culture year. By engaging in volunteer activities, he hoped to promote the positive aspects of Hull and encourage people from outside to see it as an attractive destination.

Additionally, volunteering helped David push his personal boundaries. While not a shy person, he sought to challenge himself, often participating in uncomfortable or unfamiliar activities. Over time, this approach led to significant personal growth. For example, he learned about flood prevention efforts and how to communicate complex ideas to the public, including children, through interactive presentations. His involvement in the "Living with Water" project, aimed at educating people about flood management, became a new area of interest. He was deeply impacted by Hull's 2007 floods, which had affected his father, and this project allowed him to contribute meaningfully to the city's flood defence efforts.

"I'm getting quite good at telling people about the flooding and the rationale behind the Living with Water initiative. I can point things out around Cottingham and educate people about why they're doing certain things."



Memorable Experiences

David has taken part in some unusual activities as a volunteer. One notable experience was a simulated hostage situation on the North Sea Ferries terminal, where volunteers acted as hostages to help the police train for such scenarios. The realism of the exercise – complete with blanks being fired and thunder flashes – gave David a newfound respect for the time and precision required in emergency responses.

Another memorable event involved travelling to Leeds to help with Leeds Light Night, guarding a giant suffragette figure from enthusiastic onlookers. These unique activities, along with smaller ongoing roles like managing community notice boards, highlighted the diversity of opportunities available to volunteers.

Involvement in Maritime Hull

Through the Volunteer Programme David has been closely involved in the Maritime Hull project, where he's witnessed a resurgence of interest. Many people have personal connections to Hull's maritime history, and David enjoys sharing insights and updates, such as the upcoming opening of the Arctic Corsair and the Maritime Museum. He takes pride in knowing details about the delays and development issues, such as the testing of mud pollutants in the docks. This insider knowledge makes him a more effective volunteer, as he can offer a more informed and engaging experience for visitors.

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“There’s a lot of interest in maritime because of people’s family connections. It’s nice to be able to tell people when the Arctic Corsair is going to be open to the public and things like that.”

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Health and Social Benefits

Volunteering has had a profound effect on David's physical and social wellbeing. The regular six-mile walks to manage parish council notice boards have helped him stay physically active. Socially, he formed lasting friendships and gained confidence in public speaking. When his friend and fellow volunteer, Ray, sadly passed away recently, David delivered a eulogy at his funeral – something he previously would have avoided due to self-doubt.

Challenges and Learning

David's volunteer experiences have not been totally without challenges. He recalled feeling underutilised on a small number of shifts – such as during his first shift on the South Blockhouse archaeological dig – but his openness and feedback eventually led to more fulfilling tasks. He has also encountered hostility from members of the public – for example when the volunteers are patrolling closed roads during marathons – but this has helped him to develop resilience, or “a thick skin”. Despite these occasional hurdles, David remained committed and found that volunteers often adapted and supported one another, ensuring that the community thrived.

Reflection on Volunteer Demographics

David has thrived since joining the programme but notes a lack of younger people, which he attributes to limited availability due to work and family commitments. He would also like to see more cultural diversity among volunteers, which he feels would have additional benefits such as increasing participation in health drives and other community-based engagement initiatives, where language and cultural barriers exist.

Looking Ahead

Since the programme has transitioned from Absolutely Cultured to HEY! Volunteering, David has noticed more volunteer opportunities emerging, including projects beyond Hull, in places like Bridlington. He expressed optimism about the future, believing that as more people experienced the positive impact of volunteers, public perceptions and participation would grow.

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“I’m seeing more and more opportunities in the East Riding, like the Blue Light Festival in Withernsea. There are actually a lot of volunteers who don’t live in Hull, they live in the villages, Barton, Goole, so it’s nice that they can get somewhere closer.”

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TRANSITION TO HEY! VOLUNTEERING

As Absolutely Cultured found its feet in the new world and its strategic objectives crystallised, it became clear that the Volunteer Programme was standing at a critical moment. With Absolutely Cultured focused on creating a vibrant, thriving and connected cultural ecology in Hull, there were questions about the long-term sustainability of a Volunteer Programme dedicated to this mission alone, particularly with uncertainty around sources of funding. Clearly there was potential for the Volunteer Programme to be used in an even broader context to support tourism, heritage, regeneration projects and other strands of work, but how would this look and who would be responsible?

To answer these questions the team embarked on a systemic review consisting of an Options Appraisal conducted by the New Citizenship Project, a participation strategy and innovation consultancy, to assess and make recommendations on the legal and organisational structure of the Volunteer Programme. Working with volunteers via participatory co-creation workshops, the review indicated that the Volunteer Programme would benefit from operating in a more independent manner, with a clear and distinct brand, ethos, governance, management structure and funding strategy. In order to start working towards these aims, it was recommended that the Volunteer Programme enter a **transition phase** where the full array of options could be properly considered, i.e., remaining with Absolutely Cultured, establishing the Volunteer Programme as its own legal entity, or transitioning to another parent organisation.



Through formal consultation with the volunteers and stakeholders, the decision was made to operate the Volunteer Programme through Visit Hull and East Yorkshire (VHEY), a unique tourism partnership between Hull City Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council, which later became one of the first the Local Visitor Economy Partnerships in 2023. The agreement allowed the Volunteer Programme to retain its successful operational model and ethos, whilst also creating a distinct identity that would allow it to explore new strategies and opportunities.

During this period of reflection and transition it was absolutely critical that volunteers were part of the journey. They were consulted on each stage of the process and kept regularly updated via letters, emails, Q+A sessions, online meetings and social media updates. Feedback from volunteers suggests they greatly appreciated the opportunity to share their preferences and concerns, and felt reassured by the transparency of the decision-making process.

With investment from Hull City Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council, the HEY! Volunteer Programme was launched in 2021. It was designed as a permanent volunteer network covering Hull, Humber and East Yorkshire, retaining the spirit of the original programme but with a wider geographical remit to cover both local authority areas.

Again, Spirit of 2012 played a crucial role in safeguarding the programme, awarding £200,000 to Hull City Council in April 2021.

The strategic partnership with the region's tourism body opened up new advocacy opportunities too, with volunteers deployed to support various projects, events and conferences designed to promote and celebrate the region.

About HEY! Volunteering

- HEY! Volunteering supports various sectors, including arts, heritage, culture, tourism, and events.
- It offers volunteers the chance to be involved in a range of activities, from major public events to community-driven initiatives.
- Rebranding to HEY! Volunteering reflects the programme's broader geographical scope (Hull and East Yorkshire) and its long-term ambitions.



COASTAL HERITAGE VOLUNTEERING

In 2022, HEY! Volunteering secured a grant through the Heritage Lottery Innovation Fund to explore the possibility of extending the programme to incorporate a new bespoke Coastal Heritage Volunteer Programme around the East Yorkshire coast and hinterland region, including locations such as Bridlington, Hornsea, Withernsea, and Goole.

Following a R&D period involving consultation with existing HEY! Volunteers, heritage venues and interest groups, HEY! Brid was launched, a pilot project testing the feasibility of delivering an expanded Volunteer Programme specifically for Bridlington residents with an interest in arts, culture and heritage.

The programme provides volunteers with flexible opportunities to support local events and heritage sites of interest like Sewerby Hall. Volunteers receive the same benefits as their HEY! Volunteering counterparts, with access to Masterclasses, flexible shifts and regular social & celebration events designed to build a sense of community.



SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES & LEARNING

Navigating the move to the local authority has been a learning curve. As newcomers to such a vast organisational structure, it has taken some time to understand the scope of each department, and there was an adjustment period as the team got to grips with new policies and procedures. The size and structure of the local authority meant that budgeting, procurement and strategic decisions also face greater scrutiny.

Consultation with existing volunteers about the move highlighted concerns about protecting the roots, origins and values of the programme, along with its positive reputation built up over preceding years. In response to this, the HEY! Volunteering brand was created to celebrate and demonstrate a distinct and separate identity from the local authority, but with Hull City Council acting as custodians.

However, the move to the local authority has also brought great benefits. The Volunteer Programme is now more secure and stable than ever, with a firm commitment from both Hull City and East Riding of Yorkshire Councils to provide long-term funding. Being associated with the council provides additional visibility, whilst the programme benefits from the wraparound support of dedicated teams including safeguarding, HR and finance. The team now have access to a wide range of new and diverse networks including potential new partners and host organisations, opportunities to develop strategic relationships with council departments like housing and public health, and access to robust datasets and insights to help inform ongoing efforts to recruit younger and more ethnically diverse volunteers.

Since the move, the HEY! Volunteer Programme has also seen its profile rise nationally and internationally, as volunteers have supported some of the region's major conferences and events attended by delegates from across the world and were 'Highly Commended' in the 2023 LGC Awards for Community Involvement.

About VHEY

Visit Hull and East Yorkshire (VHEY) is the Local Visitor Economy Partnership between Hull City Council, East Riding of Yorkshire Council and the private sector visitor economy businesses across the sub-region. Created in 2006 the partnership has been the catalyst for driving growth in the local visitor, cultural and heritage economies. The framework for the VHEY Strategy has been sector led and recognises the challenges the local economies now face with an adaptable approach to four core priorities:

- **Business Growth & Support**
- **Employment & Skills**
- **Quality Destination**
- **Embracing New Landscapes**

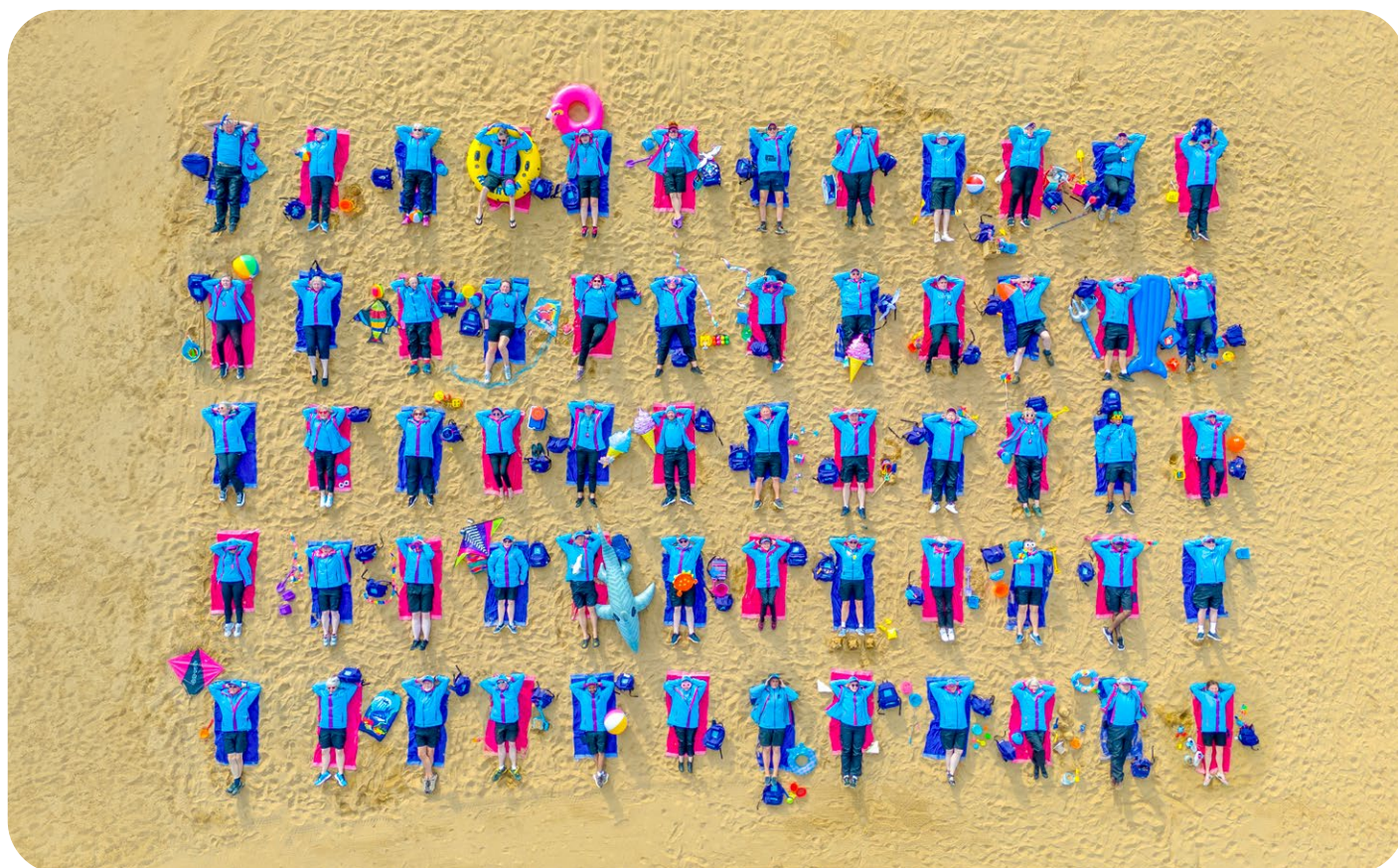
At a strategic level, the partnership brings together Hull City Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council Tourism, Heritage & Culture Portfolio Holders, Local Authority Corporate Directors, the third sector and private sector representatives, to oversee the agreed VHEY and HEY! Volunteering outputs and outcomes, with Hull City Council being the accountable body.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

Again, the team were keen to ensure that volunteers still had the same enriching experience that had been fundamental to the success of the programme by cementing its focus on arts, culture and heritage, and retaining key elements, namely: the Rewards & Recognition model, the iconic blue uniform, high-quality & varied volunteering opportunities, Masterclasses, and the use of Better Impact.

The main changes and developments that happened during this period were largely aesthetic or behind-the-scenes. They included:

- Rebranding to HEY! Volunteering, including the creation of a new logo and colour scheme, removing references to Absolutely Cultured and updating all digital and printed materials accordingly (handbooks, guides, contracts, email footers etc);
- Creating a website for the programme supported by social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter);
- Transferring all management, finance and procurement systems across to Hull City Council;
- Further streamlining the induction process whilst retaining key elements of training and development;
- Expanding the programme geographically across the East Riding of Yorkshire;
- Securing Lottery funding to explore, test and explore heritage volunteering opportunities across the region, leading to the establishment of the HEY! Brid Volunteer Programme;
- Securing commitment on funding from Hull City Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council;
- Taking on more ambassadorial role for volunteers through the close ties with VHEY (tourism partnership);
- Developing a closer working relationship with East Riding of Yorkshire Council;
- Moving the programme's base from Humber Street Gallery to VHEY's offices in Hull, further enhancing the relationship between the programme and both Local Authorities;
- Establishing new partnerships with major projects and festivals including Freedom Festival and Hull Maritime Project.



CASE STUDY: FASILAT

Fasilat, originally from Nigeria, recently relocated from Dubai to the UK with her family to pursue her studies at the University of Hull, specialising in special needs education, disabilities, and inclusion. She is a relatively new volunteer, having joined the HEY! Volunteer Programme in November 2023. She has three school-aged children and balances her academic life with part-time work as a healthcare assistant.

Academic Background

Fasilat's dissertation focuses on parental perspectives of children living with autism. The Volunteer Programme has been instrumental in giving her hands-on experience with inclusion, disabilities, autism, and neurodivergence, through both Masterclasses and volunteer shifts supporting children with additional needs.

Her volunteer work has provided practical insights, enhancing her skills in communication, problem-solving, and understanding autism. Applying her academic knowledge in real-world settings has helped her develop into a confident educator, well-equipped to support children with special needs.



Integration into the Community

As an international student, Fasilat initially had concerns about adapting to life in Hull. However, her experience has been overwhelmingly positive. Through her academic studies and volunteer work, she has built meaningful connections within the community. Her work at the Gipsyville Library, where she helps organise arts and crafts sessions for children and coffee chats for the elderly, has been particularly rewarding. These sessions not only support her studies but also give her a sense of belonging in the community. She describes Hull as a peaceful and welcoming place that made both her and her family feel safe and comfortable.

Her volunteer experience with HEY! Volunteering has been transformative. She feels like an ambassador for the city, having travelled to London to speak about Hull's culture, heritage, and warmth. The inclusive environment she found in Hull has not only helped her integrate but also provided her with professional growth. Her involvement earned her an Employability Award from the university, a recognition that will enhance her career prospects.

"I've boosted my knowledge and experience, and my other skills, like my analytical skills, my problem-solving skills through all the training. And my communication skills have also improved. With English as my second language and coming from Arab Emirates, I've feel like I've been welcomed in because they [the volunteers] have got a passion for people to be equal in society."

Personal and Professional Development

Volunteering has been an integral part of Fasilat's journey in the UK. From assisting vulnerable individuals, such as those with dementia, in her part-time job as a carer to organising community events, Fasilat has seen her confidence soar. She has gained skills in organising events, working with diverse populations, and supporting both children and the elderly.

Her shifts at Gipsyville Library, where she works with elderly people and children, have allowed her to further hone her skills in education and inclusion. Through these sessions, she guides children in arts and crafts activities, boosting their creativity while also promoting cultural awareness. Her interactions with the elderly have also helped her develop stronger communication and interpersonal skills, which she applies in her work as a healthcare assistant.

The masterclasses she attended have been particularly valuable. One of them, focused on disabilities, provided her with crucial knowledge that directly relates to her academic field. Additionally, first-aid training sessions have come in handy in her role as a carer, enabling her to respond more effectively in emergencies.

"I work as a care assistant, supporting vulnerable individuals, people with dementia, people with behavioural challenges. As a volunteer I've been able to boost my skills in this area, which has really boosted my confidence. There was this recent masterclass I attended just a couple of months back relating to disabilities, and it really impacted my area of study. So it all came together and it's made me a better person."

Looking Forward

Fasilat is at a crossroads regarding her future in the UK. While she is considering returning to Nigeria, she hopes to gain more global experience before doing so. If she can secure a work visa or a Global Talent Visa, she plans to stay in the UK to continue her work in special needs education. She is particularly passionate about working with NGOs focused on children with autism and other disabilities, where she can give back by applying the skills and knowledge she has gained throughout her academic and volunteer journey.

"The warmth, the togetherness, the inclusivity, that made me really love being here [in Hull]. And that is part of the reason why I'm trying to give back by joining as a volunteer, to give back to the East Yorkshire region."



COMPOSITION OF THE VOLUNTEER PROGRAMME

The evolution of the scope and purpose of the Volunteer Programme – in moving from being events-driven to its current format – has only slightly affected the demographic make-up of volunteers over time. Since 2017 we have seen:

- An increase in the proportion of older and retired volunteers;
- No change in the proportion of volunteers from White British backgrounds who make up the largest group (though roughly in line with Hull's wider demographic make-up);
- An increase in the proportion of Asian / Asian British volunteers;
- The proportion of disabled volunteers remain at around 6%;
- Almost no change at all in the proportion of male vs female volunteers – females are still much more likely to volunteer.

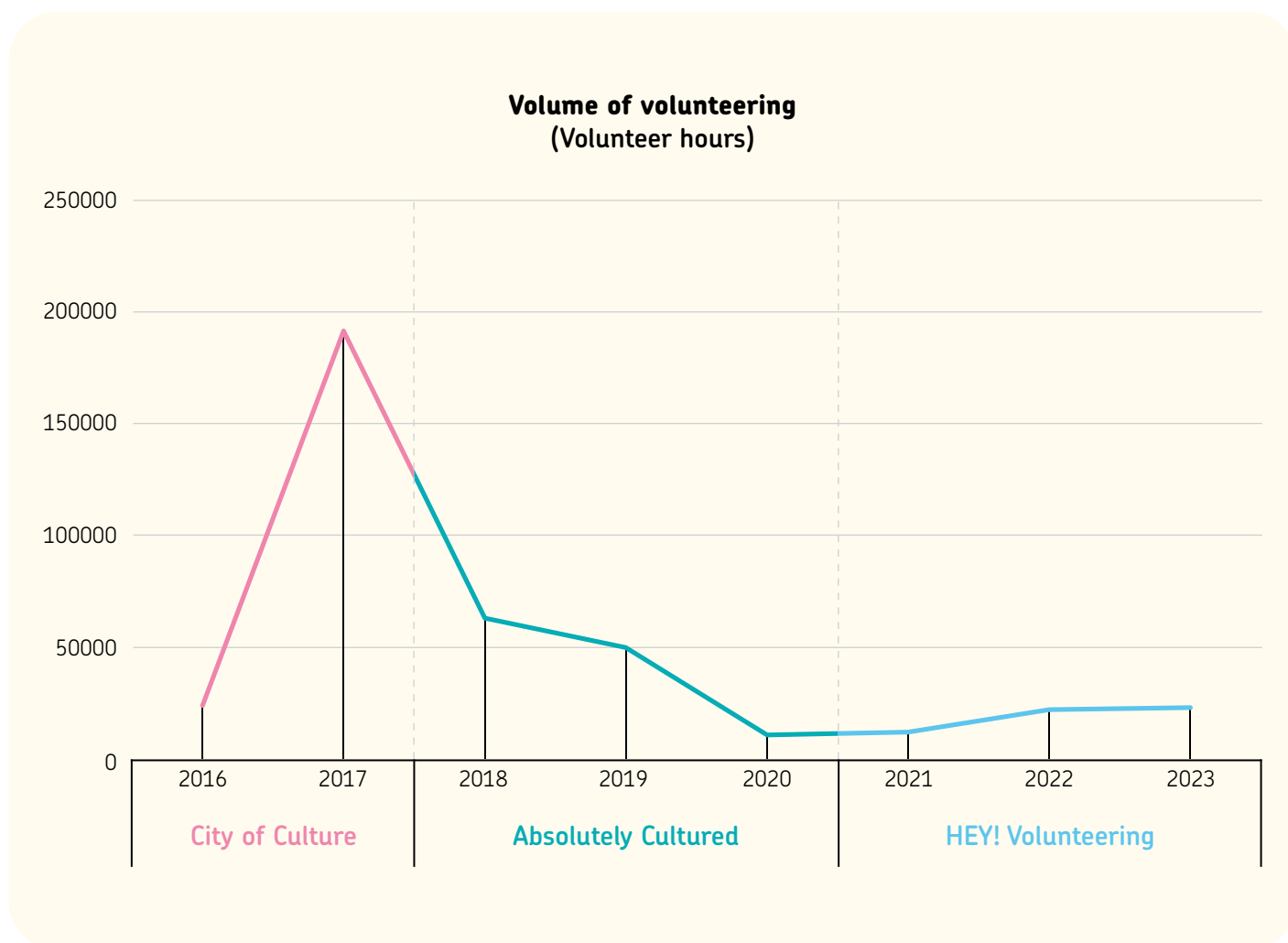


Figure 1: Volume of volunteering

Volunteer Profile by Age
2017 (n=2,488) vs 2024 (n=2,380)

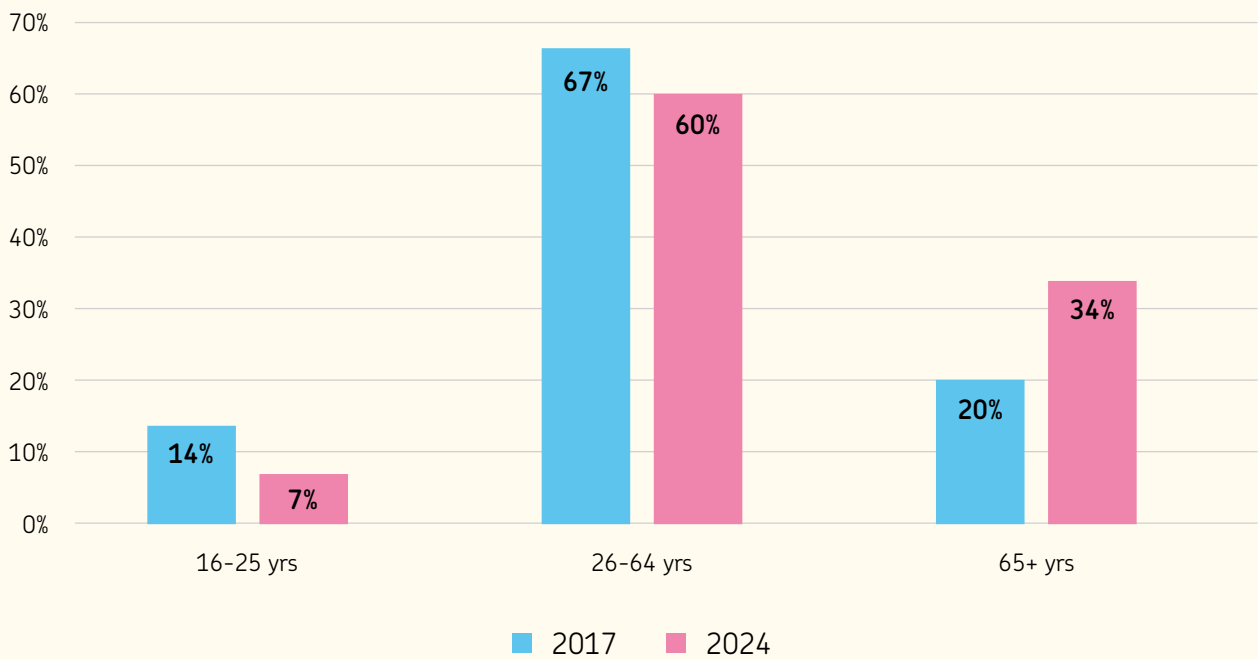


Figure 2: Volunteer Profile by Age

Disability Status of Volunteers
2017 (n=2,488) vs 2024 (n=2,392)

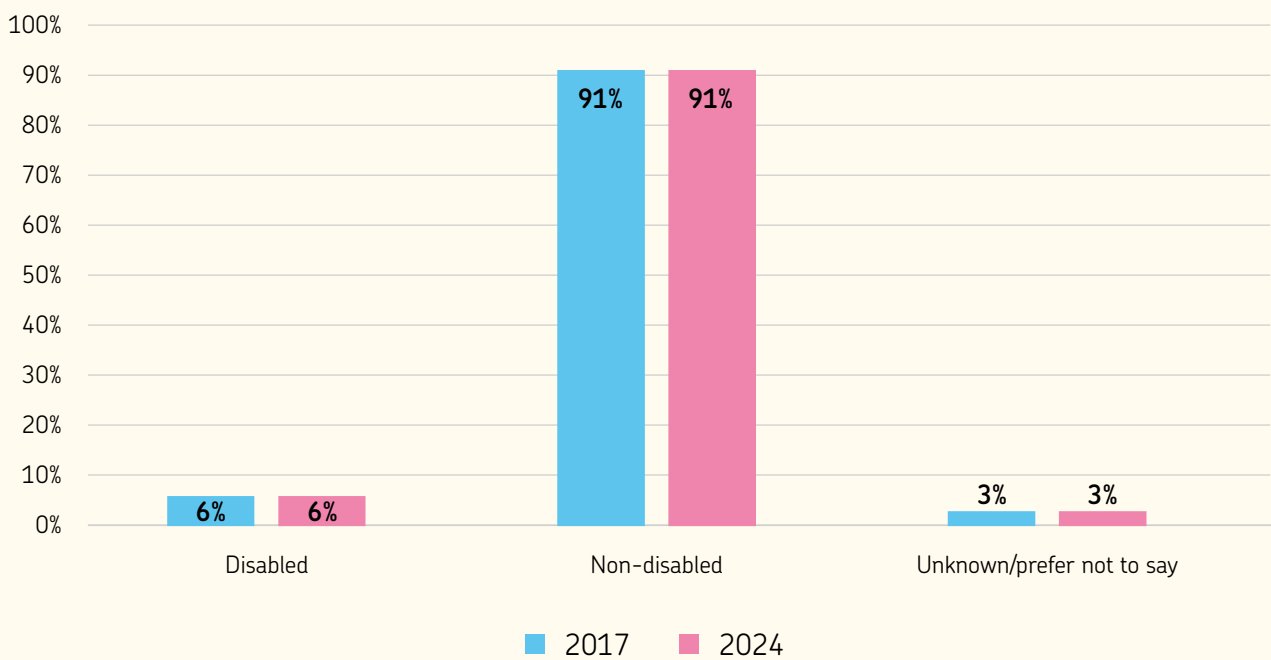


Figure 3: Disability Status of Volunteers

Volunteer Profile by Ethnicity 2017 (n=2,488) vs 2024 (n=2,392)

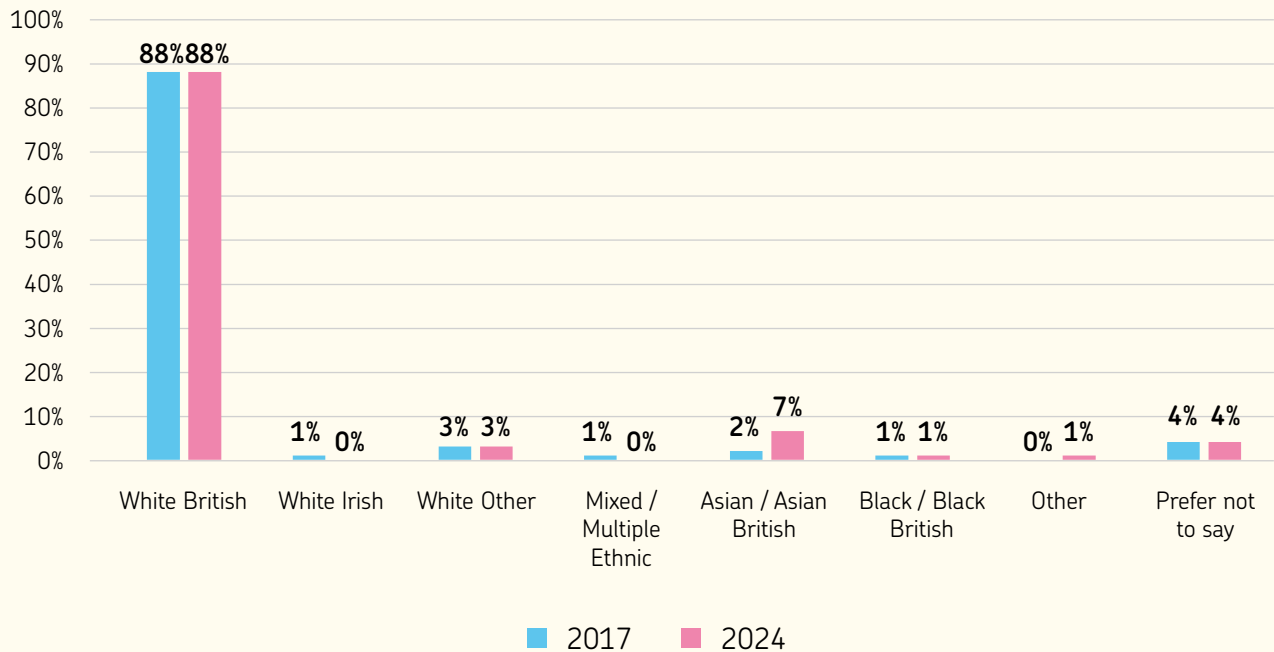


Figure 4: Volunteer Profile by Ethnicity

Volunteer Profile by Gender 2017 (n=2,488) vs 2024 (n=2,488)

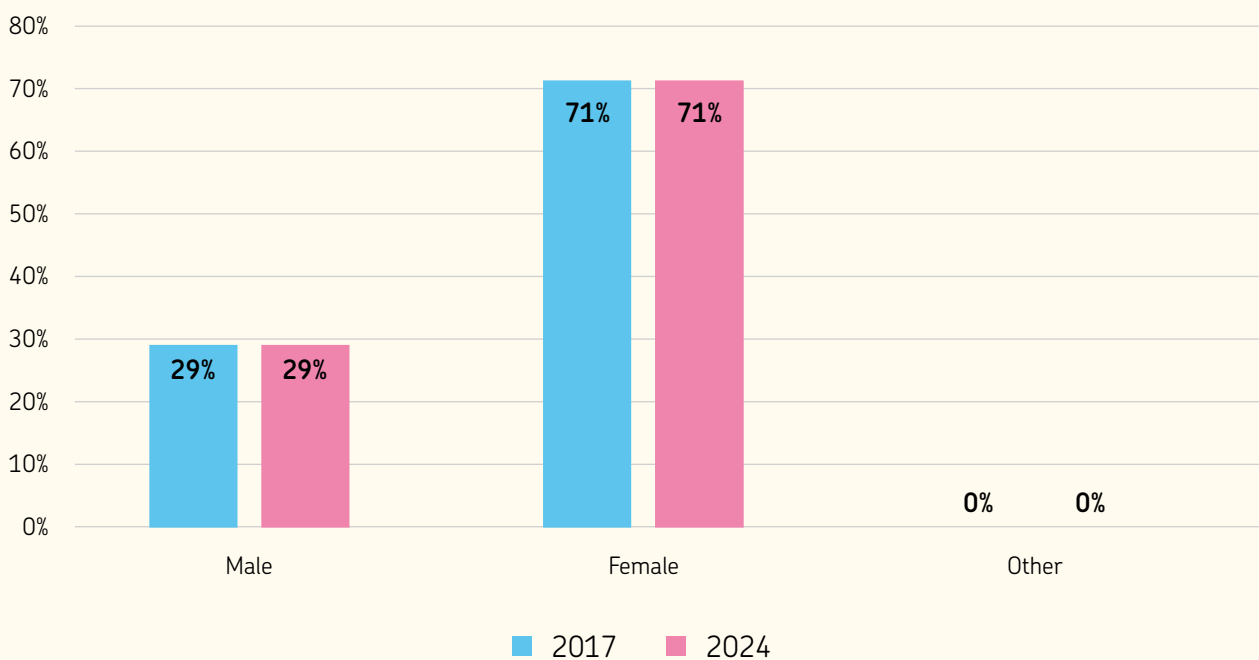


Figure 5: Volunteer Profile by Gender

RELATIONSHIP WITH SPIRIT OF 2012

Contributing £3.65m since 2014 and as the primary funding partner for the programme in all its forms, Spirit of 2012 has been absolutely fundamental to the success of the Volunteer Programme. This consistent and long-term relationship has provided a level of financial security that has enabled the programme to:

- Adapt and find its feet in a city finding its place post-City of Culture;
- Test, learn and grow innovative new approaches to volunteer recruitment and long-term sustainability;
- Draw up and implement long-term strategic plans;
- Build capacity by investing in infrastructure including staff and staff training;
- Overcome major challenges and risks, such as those brought about by the pandemic;

- Leverage additional support from other donors, sponsors and stakeholders who value the programme's longevity and credibility;
- Provide a level of reassurance to volunteers, community groups and local organisations that the programme is here to stay.

Beyond just the financial investment, the relationship with Spirit of 2012 has also provided opportunities to network with other funded projects, enabling the team to forge valuable partnerships within the sector and draw on insights from similar programmes and initiatives. The Spirit of 2012 team have shown unwavering support and enthusiasm for the Volunteer Programme, offering flexibility, space to learn, and a genuine interest in understanding challenges, fostering an environment that encourages open, honest evaluation and continuous improvement in our work.



Hull 2017

Awarded £2.85m
in October 2014 to
Hull 2017 Culture Company
(inclusive of budget to support
the volunteering programme)



Absolutely Cultured

Awarded £600,000
in April 2018 to
Absolutely Cultured



HEY! Volunteering

Awarded £200,000
in April 2021 to
Hull City Council

LEARNING & RECOMMENDATIONS

Delivering the Hull Volunteer Programme has provided invaluable insights into creating a successful volunteer initiative. In this section, we outline key factors that contributed to its success and offer actionable recommendations for future programmes aiming to recruit, engage, and retain volunteers.



1

ESTABLISH A STRONG PROGRAMME IDENTITY

What we learned:

From the beginning, the Volunteer Programme stood out due to its distinctive brand identity and tone of voice. Bespoke, eye-catching uniforms, professional imagery, and consistent messaging created a strong sense of belonging amongst volunteers, helping them to feel part of something significant. This foundation has been key to the programme's exceptional volunteer retention.

82% of all current HEY! volunteers joined before the end of 2017, including **68%** of active volunteers (those who have logged into the system recently).

At a strategic level, establishing a unique identity positioned the programme as more than just a support mechanism for City of Culture activities. It became a core component of the event's success, setting a high standard for Volunteer Programmes nationwide.

Recommendation:

Invest time and resources in creating a compelling and inclusive identity that reflects the programme's values and goals. This foundation can drive engagement and ensure long-term loyalty.



2

MAKE VOLUNTEERING PART OF THE NORM

What we learned:

From day one, the Volunteer Programme was embedded into the broader City of Culture organisation, supporting and enhancing all strands of activity. This collaboration between project teams and the Volunteer Programme ensured that volunteering was treated as a core delivery component rather than an afterthought.

This integration enhanced the programme's reputation and created a culture in which volunteering became central to the success of every major initiative.

Recommendation:

Position the Volunteer Programme as a key player in organisational activities, ensuring alignment from the planning stage of all major projects.

3

FRONTLOAD THE BUDGET

What we learned:

Allocating a significant portion of the budget upfront was critical to delivering a high-quality recruitment and onboarding process, including professional training, tailored communications, and distinctive uniforms.

This early investment was instrumental in attracting a diverse volunteer base and creating a positive first impression that sustained interest and loyalty. Over time, the budget's primary focus shifted from onboarding to maintaining training quality, recognising volunteers, and delivering targeted outreach campaigns.

Recommendation:

Prioritise early-stage investments to ensure recruitment, onboarding, and branding are of the highest standard. After setup, focus resources on maintaining quality and implementing cost-effective systems for volunteer recognition.



4

ADOPT A VOLUNTEER-CENTRED APPROACH

What we learned:

Placing volunteers at the heart of decision-making fostered a shared sense of ownership, which has been pivotal to sustained engagement. Regular consultation, open communication channels, and a commitment to inclusivity has ensured the programme remains accessible and relevant.

Flexible roles, transparent processes, and regular updates strengthened trust and encouraged participation across a diverse volunteer base.

Recommendation:

Establish mechanisms to gather and act on volunteer feedback, and ensure opportunities cater to a wide range of skills, interests, and availability.

5

PRIORITISE TRAINING AND SUPPORT

What we learned:

Comprehensive training and regular development opportunities equipped volunteers with the skills and confidence needed to excel. These efforts also built a strong community and reinforced volunteers' sense of value and appreciation.

Recommendation:

Invest in ongoing training to maintain high standards and provide volunteers with opportunities to grow both personally and professionally.



What we learned:

We recognised the importance of a volunteer reward system from the outset but we didn't get this right straight away. Initially volunteers were incentivised by offers like exclusive behind-the-scenes access to major events and other lucrative benefits, which unintentionally created a transactional mindset among some volunteers. However, over time we were able to strike a balance, maintaining meaningful recognition while managing resources and expectations effectively.

The current system has been fundamental to sustaining volunteer engagement and satisfaction, and includes the Masterclasses, celebration events and the popular blue uniforms.

Plus, through volunteer shifts and Masterclasses, volunteers are regularly invited to share their expertise, enhancing the sense of community and ownership within the programme.

Recommendation:

Develop a reward system that balances recognition with fostering intrinsic motivation. Tailor incentives to create a culture of appreciation without over-reliance on material rewards.



7

ADAPT TO CHANGING CONTEXTS

What we learned:

The programme successfully transitioned to HEY! Volunteering, broadening its focus beyond arts and culture to include sectors like heritage and tourism. Adjusting to smaller budgets while retaining core elements ensured continued impact.

Recommendation:

Build flexibility into the programme design to adapt to evolving priorities and financial constraints.

8

ESTABLISH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

What we learned:

Collaborations with local authorities and tourism bodies provided financial stability and expanded the range of volunteer opportunities. Our extensive network of host organisations has provided us with a regular stream of diverse roles and opportunities for our volunteers, keeping them happy and engaged.

Recommendation:

Develop partnerships to leverage resources, increase geographic reach, and create diverse volunteering roles.

9

IMPLEMENT A FAIR SHIFT ALLOCATION PROCESS

What we learned:

Initially, a “first-come, first-serve” system led to dissatisfaction among some volunteers. Later improvements created a more transparent and equitable allocation process, although some early perceptions remain difficult to shift.

Recommendation:

Establish a fair and transparent shift allocation system from the start to ensure equal access to opportunities and avoid long-term misconceptions.

10

CREATE A BUDDY SYSTEM

What we learned:

Introduced in 2019, the buddy system paired experienced volunteers with new recruits, fostering peer support and enhancing the overall volunteer experience.

Recommendation:

Introduce a buddy system during the early stages of the programme to build confidence, strengthen community ties, and provide targeted support for new volunteers.

FURTHER READING

A report on the feasibility study we conducted around Coastal Heritage Volunteering opportunities in East Yorkshire (informing our HEY! Brid project) is available [here](#).

Our report on the move from Hull 2017 to Absolutely Cultured is available [here](#).

Information about the impact of Hull UK City of Culture 2017 is available [here](#).

The 2017 Volunteer Programme Evaluation Report is available on request.
If you would like access to this, or require any further information about anything contained in this report, please email us at [**hello@heyvolunteering.co.uk**](mailto:hello@heyvolunteering.co.uk)





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HEY! Volunteering in partnership with

