



# MEDWAY CHANGE MAKERS



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## About

### **Medway Change Makers Evaluation Report – a new cultural volunteering model for Medway**

Medway Change Makers was a partnership-driven two-tier strategic cultural volunteering model tailored to Medway's needs, delivering benefits to the voluntary and cultural sectors. It was intended to maximise wellbeing and overcome participation barriers for populations with low volunteering and cultural engagement rates.

The model reflected relationships and ideas forged during Medway's City of Culture bid. Jointly delivered by partners from across the cultural, voluntary and public sectors, it was intended to establish a model with deep roots, embedded within the local cultural sector.

Medway Change Makers was a partnership project intended to be part of 'Creative Medway', a group of creatives, with event makers and Medway Council's support to embed inclusive volunteering within public-facing work (often for the first time) on an ongoing basis. Growing community spirit, pride and sense of place was central to our ambition. The press and media strategy, volunteer branding and volunteer potential from local businesses via Medway Place Board cemented Medway Change Makers as valued and visible ambassadors.

This project united four established, invested and strategic organisations with a strong, shared vision for the change community-focussed cultural volunteering could make within Medway, with excellent track records delivering partnership work at scale. The partnership brought together:

- MVA – innovative volunteering models and nuanced understanding of barriers to engagement and connections across the local and national sector.
- The local cultural sector via Creative Medway committed to widen access, inclusion and community engagement and grow impact.
- Medway's Creative People & Places NPO, Ideas Test, contributing cultural insight and leadership. Ideas Test was the lead partner for the project, managing the grant and hosting and line managing the Volunteer Project Manager and Project Assistant.
- The business and media connections of the Medway Place Board who's ambitious placemaking agenda emphasises community identity development and who bring exceptional local business and media networks. Our partnership and our partners' significant commitments to the project in our MOUs demonstrated buy-in across policy, placemaking, event-makers and the third sector, and the project's long-term ambition.

The intention was to share Spirit's vision to support more people to benefit from participating in the arts through volunteering. Inclusivity was at the core of Medway Change Makers, to connect people through events, give individuals tools to thrive regardless of background, disability or circumstance and support event makers to champion inclusion.

With our action-learning model matching Spirit's reflective practice approach, this project was a learning tool to scale a new cultural volunteering approach on strong foundations. We prioritised evaluation, building and using our evidence base through local third sector development and wider regional and national knowledge-sharing mechanisms. This was a unique opportunity in Medway to maximise impact, connecting a sector-wide desire to engage communities with the strategic vision for events developed by Medway Council and Place Board against the backdrop of investment into Medway as a 'Levelling Up place'.

Significant inequalities exist across Medway's population, with 29 neighbourhoods ranked among the 20% most deprived nationally (10 in the poorest 10%). Medway's geography posed difficulties with public transport, which was prohibitively expensive. Medway's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment notes that 1/6th of adults live with ongoing mental health problems and 16% (higher than average) with limiting long-term health conditions or disabilities. Cultural engagement is low (57%), and many communities believe the local cultural offer is 'not for us', with language a significant barrier within certain populations. Medway's average reading age is 9.

## Medway Change Makers - the beginnings, the middle and the end and some great highlights

The first six months of the project were focused on recruiting a Project Manager and formulating a detailed framework of monitoring and evaluating information, including collecting, recording and analysing data. The project was delayed by 3 months due to a prolonged recruitment process.

Once in post, the Project Manager prioritised the creation of key infrastructure for the project, including establishing strong connections with a wide range of local organisations who could signpost potential volunteers or provide volunteering opportunities for volunteering. She also researched and selected a web-based volunteer Customer Relations Management system (CRM).

Months 6 – 12 were occupied with establishing a project brand identity, building a web and social media presence, designing and purchasing branded items and uniforms for volunteers and customising the volunteer CRM system to the project. Volunteer recruitment started in this period, and by the end of the 12 months, 24 volunteers, including 2 Ambassadors, had been recruited. Changes were made including the change of the name from 'Heroes' to 'Ambassadors', volunteers who would support the recruitment of further volunteers. This was to avoid confusion with the use of 'Medway Heroes' by another local project. In addition, we found that the original idea of focussing on target postcodes in order to recruit a hero who would then recruit their friends and neighbours to the scheme, was not working. We also trailed using 'interest' groups (i.e. specific language or ability groups) as a substitute means of peer engagement by again this was not consistently effective in gaining interest for the programme and was extremely staff resource heavy, so this was stopped. Medway Change Makers, through our partnership with Creative Medway, supported Medway Culture Fest 24, a year-long programme of mixed cultural activity across Medway, celebrating local arts and coinciding with several significant local anniversaries. Medway Change Makers is promoted throughout the Culture Fest's media campaign, which is ongoing, and literature directed interested parties to the sign-up page to become Medway Change Makers volunteers. Creative Medway (who hosted this sign-up page on their website) reported that the Medway Change Makers registration page was the location on their website which received the most direct landings.



'The Artful Cleanup' as part of the Big Help Out campaign was featured on a local television channel (KMTV), as well as on [Big Help Out's](#) nationally reaching social media accounts. We continued to be attached to Creative Medway's Medway Culture Fest programme, and therefore to be featured throughout the related ongoing media campaign. Examples include: [Medway Culture Fest 24 | Medway Council](#) and [Medway Culture Fest 24 launches with events to showcase Towns' talent and commemorate historic anniversaries](#)

Medway Change Makers engaged a total of 213 potential volunteers within these communities with 74 transitioning to become volunteers, 4 of which became Ambassadors of the project helping to recruit other Medway Change Makers. They then volunteered at 'transactional' low-commitment, one-off volunteering opportunities at cultural events, the most popular of which were [Icon Theatre's Ghosts Ships at Chatham's Historic Dockyard](#), [Medway's River Lit Festival](#), [Summer Proms at Fort Amherst](#), [The Rochester Art Fair](#),



Medway's most significant areas of deprivation (from the 4 lowest indices of deprivation) and low cultural engagement as well as marginalised, protected characteristic as defined by the Equality Act (2009) and Global Majority population communities were targeted as volunteers. It was intended that Ambassadors would shape and steer the programme and engage as critical friends with organisations developing volunteering opportunities.

Materials were appropriate for a low reading age, in the 5 most commonly spoken languages in Medway, in video and BSL form and our budget included print for those without digital access.

Significant, 'on the ground' work was undertaken chiefly by the project manager to establish connections with community organisations (charities, hobby groups, schools, etc) and local businesses to both act as referral points for potential volunteers to the programme, but also as host organisations for volunteers to undertake volunteering opportunities. This experience was invaluable in helping the project team to communicate the value of Medway Change Makers locally, both to community organisations and to potential volunteers, by being able to share legitimate evidence of the early programme in action.

Branding assisted in promoting the project to a range of potential stakeholders.

Year two was marked largely by volunteering activity. We saw individuals taking on volunteering opportunities through the programme on a significantly greater scale than previously, allowing meaningful conversations about the value of the programme to occur both with volunteers and host organisations. Feedback on the success of these volunteering opportunities was generally very positive, both from a volunteer perspective and from our host organisations.

Work continued over this period to develop, maintain and strengthen relationships with host organisations taking on volunteers. We found that organisations were approaching the project to request volunteers, rather than the other way around, as was previously. This suggested that sector awareness of the project had improved and that word of mouth about it was positive. The project manager spoke at more community and sector events, built strong bonds with new community organisations as both potential volunteer hosts and links for volunteer recruitment, and witnessed these relationships yield tangible results.

Ongoing evaluation was dedicated to assessing the successes of the project and what hadn't worked as anticipated, leading to the need to pivot on some of our initial plans. These pivots were agreed by Spirit of 2012 via a reprofiled budget. The experience of pausing to evaluate the project based on what may have changed from the bid stage, what may need reworking etc was invaluable.

We worked in this period with Square Pegs, a Medway-based theatre company that work with learning disabled and neurodiverse young adults, on a training programme to support their participants to become volunteers. This project worked closely with a small group of their service users to identify training and support needs to allow them to become creative volunteers, and we produced a learning resource to report on the outcomes of the project. The hope is that this work will act as a pilot and will be able to be rolled out to allow more individuals with learning disabilities to be supported into volunteering. Longer term, it is expected to produce a responsive training package for host organisations, on how to appropriately support volunteers with learning disabilities at their events and activities. This work is in its foundation stages.

We developed a closer partnership with the events team at Medway Council working in collaboration with them to embed volunteering in their activities at the planning stage to ensure that volunteers are properly inducted, trained and supported whilst participating in large-scale events of considerable local significance throughout the year.

In the second half of year two, the Medway Change Makers programme saw significant growth in terms of recruitment, with a 70% growth rate since the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the year - a trajectory which in the early days of Y3 seemed to continue. The increase in volunteer numbers drove an expected increase in volunteering activity, and we were proud to report that since the project's inception, Medway Change Makers volunteers had completed well over 400 hours of volunteering activity in Medway's cultural sector in the previous two years. We continued to build new relationships with host organisations (and returning to existing ones) to maintain a varied and exciting programme of volunteering opportunities for our volunteers. We were able to work on a high-profile event through Medway Council - during our grant funding period, most Council events had been cancelled due to funding issues and as such there had been limited opportunities to engage with them in terms of volunteering until May of the second year, when a small team of volunteers supported 'Sweeps Festival'. Whilst this event posed challenges for us (which we will unpack later in this report), we are pleased to have built this relationship and continued to develop it going forward.

Medway Change Makers participated in the national 'Big Help Out' campaign by producing our bespoke event, 'The Artful Cleanup', which sought to blend the low-commitment participatory volunteering activity championed by 'Big Help Out' with our own creative and cultural spin. The event featured a volunteer litter pick of the waterfront area of Gillingham (in a postcode ranked as highly deprived on the IMD), followed by creative workshops led by local artists transforming litter into crafts. The event was well attended by a young audience and featured on a local TV channel (KMTV) and on Big Help Out's nationally reaching social media accounts. [We captured high quality content of this event that can be used to enhance the reach of the ongoing project.](#)

A significant moment in the project in the latter part of the second year was the recruitment of a Project Assistant to support the Project Manager in the day-to-day delivery of the programme, in response to an identified issue of limited capacity. From mid-July onwards, the additional capacity on the team made a considerable impact, allowing us to move forward, including the planning of two new events and the launch of access to online training for our volunteers in various transferable skills. We were also able to introduce a rewards programme where volunteers can redeem vouchers for access to local cultural attractions and events in exchange for volunteering hours.

Medway Change Makers was an **action learning project**, developed with representatives from communities, refined and developed over the funding lifespan through monitoring and evaluation, which also **provided the tools to share learning locally, regionally and nationally via our cross-sector contacts**.

One of our action learning events was a round table event for representatives from the local cultural sector. This brought together event managers and organisational leaders in a casual setting to encourage sharing, where a facilitator prompted discussion regarding what concerns the sector has about working with volunteers, what barriers prevent them from engaging volunteers effectively, and what support would be helpful to embed volunteering more strongly within the local cultural sector. We hoped that this event would allow us to better understand the needs and concerns of cultural sector in this context but also to communicate the importance of prioritising the volunteer experience. We produced a specific report on these learnings that was widely shared within the Cultural and Voluntary, Community, Social Enterprise and Faith (VCSEF) sectors, and this learning helped us to steer the next steps of the programme to provide adequate support.

## Evaluation and Monitoring

We worked significantly with Spirit of 2012 to ensure that our evaluation methodology was fit for purpose, allowing us to begin collecting data from our participants in the second half of the first year. The ideology and main themes of our evaluation remained unchanged, but through consultation with our grant manager the wording and format of some of our survey questions for volunteers were tweaked to better reflect the themes of the project and the quality of the data received.

1. The collection of participant baseline data began in the second half of year 1 and it took some time before we could compare and contrast baseline data.
2. Due to delays at the start of the project, which led to delays in building recruitment momentum, the timeline of our evaluation had to respond to the new timeframe. We were not in a position in our

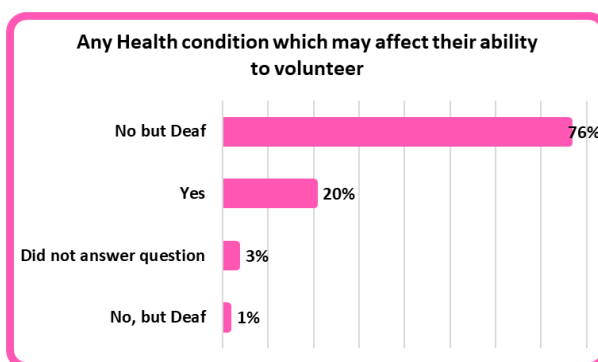
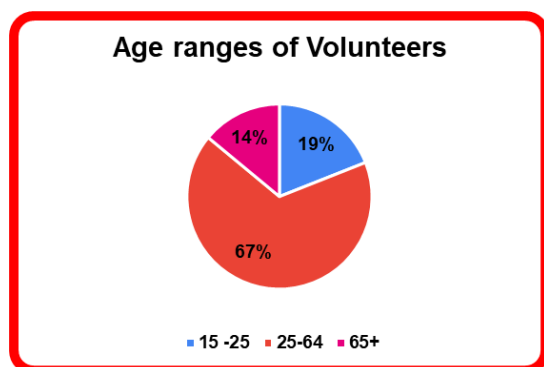
volunteers' journeys where it was appropriate to collect midway evaluation, until we were significantly past the midpoint of our project and entering the last 6 months of the project.

3. Work with a Medway-based theatre company who work with learning disabled and neurodiverse young adults, on a training programme to support their participants to become volunteers, indicated that some elements of our baseline data collection form were inappropriate for their group. In particular they were concerned about the ONS4 wellbeing questions, which they thought could be triggering for participants with mental ill health. They were also concerned about the perceptions of disability questions, with what they described as 'blurry' definitions (many of their participants would technically be considered disabled but may not identify with that label). We worked with this organisation to develop an edited version of our data collection form, which presented the questions in more accessible ways, and hosted an in-person group session where a facilitator explained the questions, helped with the definitions, and was on hand to provide wellbeing support if the content was triggering. We also anticipated that some participants may skip questions they felt unable to answer.
4. During the second half of the second year through some of our volunteers who had been with the programme for an extended period, we were able to collect evaluation data to demonstrate the impact of the programme. We had already begun collecting updated information from our baseline survey but also undertook in depth volunteer interviews to produce case study reports. We held focus groups to investigate further the barriers to volunteering - we utilised MVA's existing relationships with community organisations working with demographic groups who are statistically less likely to engage in volunteering to understand their barriers to engagement with more nuance and planned practical steps to support them into volunteering if they wished.

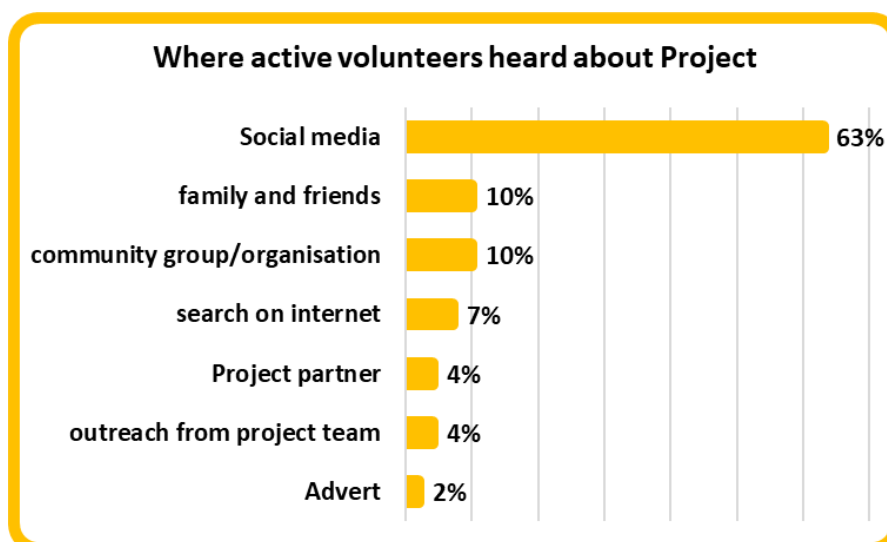
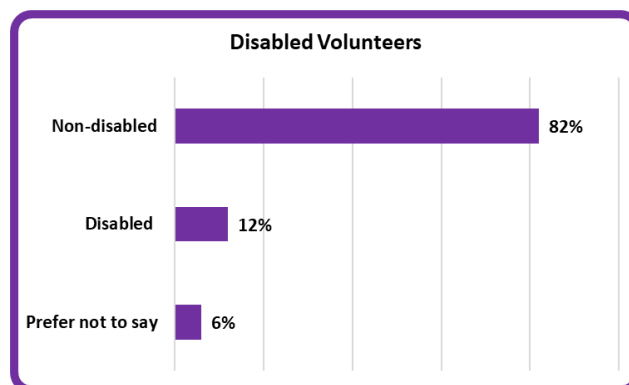
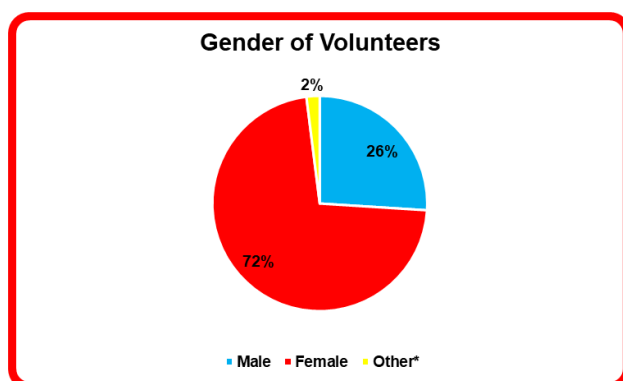
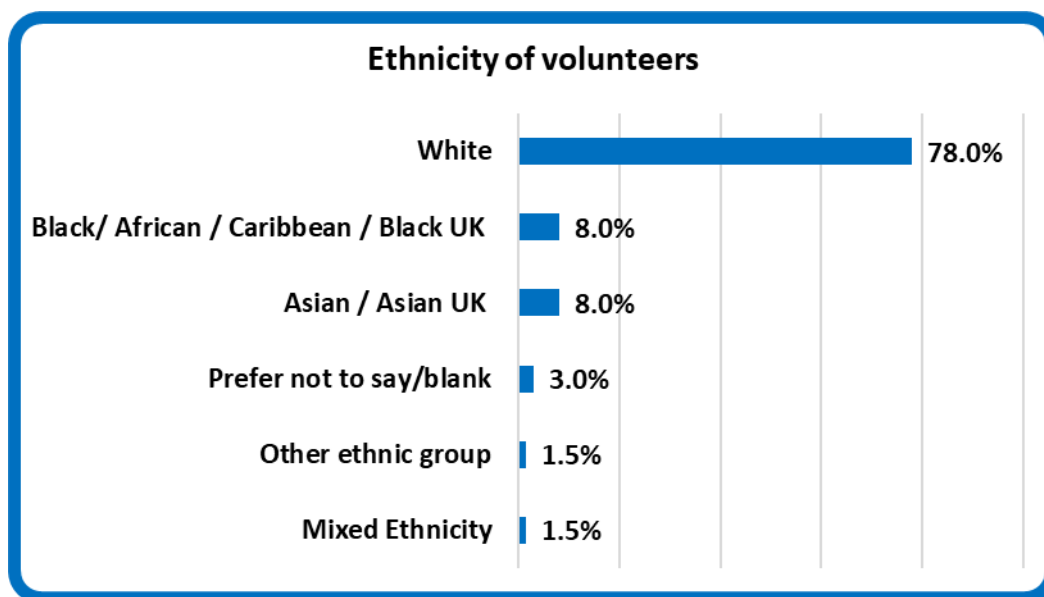
## Facts and Figures







N.B. Last respondent does not consider being deaf a health condition but rather that they speak a different language which is a barrier.



**Training provided to volunteers included:** Customer Service Skills (2); Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (4); Fire Extinguisher Training (2); Fire Warden (1); First Aid at Work training (8); Mental Health Awareness (5);

Safeguarding Essentials (Level 1) **(8)** and Social Media Marketing **(3)**, with **Safeguarding and First Aid training being the popular choices.**

Participants volunteered 1035 hours at 54 events (including training detailed above), volunteering sessions ranged from 60 mins to 20 hours mins (running over multiple dates).

## More highlights

1. 20% of volunteers had a health condition that would normally affect their ability to volunteer, double the anticipated number at the commencement of the project.
2. We were able to deliver on agreements with several host organisations by sending volunteers (who contributed positively) to those events and activities. This strengthened the relationship with these host organisations and encouraged them to work with Medway Change Makers, resulting in some organisations coming back to request more volunteers. Organisations also recommended working with Medway Change Makers to their sector contacts, spreading positive word of mouth and increasing the reach of the project.
3. Since the inception of the project, our volunteers have completed 1035 hours of volunteering in the cultural sector in Medway at 54 events over multiple dates and years.
4. Our targeted work with Square Pegs (a disability arts organisation) on a support programme for 5 neurodiverse and learning-disabled young adults becoming volunteers began in the second half of year 2, and we collected baseline data from those participants so that we could report on the participants' progress. The dedicated work of staff from Square Pegs allowed these participants to take part in a volunteering activity in a supportive and structured way, tailored to respond to their individual needs. This work was intensive, expensive and time-consuming, but necessary to ensure the quality of experience for these first-time volunteers.
5. We launched a rewards programme in the latter part of year 2 where for every 10 hours of volunteering, our volunteers could redeem a reward from a catalogue of tickets to cultural activities and attractions in Medway, meaning that they and their families could participate in culture beyond their individual volunteering practice whilst engaging with Medway's cultural landscape.
6. We organised a round table event for event managers in the cultural sector to understand barriers to engaging with volunteers and to drive future learning.
7. In the second part of year 1 huge strides were made in establishing the structure and identity of the project, and the recruitment of volunteers some of whom took part in volunteering activity. Meaningful connections were made between the project and a huge variety of local organisations (varied in terms of scale, previous engagement with volunteers, unique interest). Some of these led to the development of volunteer opportunities and the referral of potential volunteers to the programme, and others opened exciting conversations about future collaborations. These included opportunities for recruitment, for developing new volunteering opportunities and included some at organisations that have previously never engaged with volunteers.
8. Anecdotally, we received feedback from some volunteers early on that taking part in volunteering through the programme had helped improve their wellbeing. A small number of volunteers joined the Medway Change Makers programme through engagement sessions by the project manager at a local mental health support charity, and these volunteers in particular, reported that taking part in volunteering activity improved their wellbeing through improved confidence, sense of accomplishment, and distraction from the stresses of their everyday lives.

9. The widespread, lighter touch recruitment in the 1st half of year 2 pushed our baseline wellbeing numbers up - a higher percentage of volunteers reported medium or high scores on their ONS4 wellbeing questions than in our first cohort. More of this cohort signed up to the project on their own initiative (i.e. in response to seeing a flyer or social media ad) rather than responding to the targeted recruitment activity that the project manager undertook in the early stages of the project.
10. Volunteers reported that the project helped them to learn about activities and events that they didn't know were happening in their local area. One volunteer who undertook her first volunteering activity through the programme at a participatory outdoor arts event, stated that she was relatively new to the Medway area and had been interested in volunteering but didn't have the sector links to know where to start. This programme has introduced her to new organisations and events that she was less likely to encounter on her own.
11. Whilst some of those who registered to volunteer did not take on volunteering opportunities and some have only taken on one, we understand that allowing this very light touch engagement with the project is essential to eventually achieving desired outcomes - volunteers felt able to observe, and then engage in a way that suited them when they felt able to in relation to their skills, comfort level and schedule. This resulted in the project having a core group of volunteers who took on a multitude of volunteering activities at various host organisations, almost all of which were new to them, whether or not the individual was new to volunteering.

## Learning

1. Our project was a partnership with other organisations and until the appointment of the Volunteering Project Manager 5 months in, the lead organisation Ideas Test and project partners lacked capacity. We had delayed the start of our recruitment until Spirit of 2012's official announcement of the award in October. Another learning point was the need to allow enough time for and to persevere with the recruitment to ensure the right person for the post was appointed. We had to re-advertise the position due to the initial poor response we received, and this paid dividends in an excellent appointment.
2. Due to the delay in the embargoed award announcement and recruiting a Project Manager we were running 3 months behind, meaning that work to plan and establish the rollout of the project could not begin until February 2023. This also impacted the collection of evaluation data as there was a delay in the recruitment of volunteers.
3. Working as a partnership between multiple organisations required us to factor in long lead times for decision making. Achieving meaningful, high-quality work with community partners required time and patience. It took the Project Manager significant time to engage on a one-to-one level with community groups, their participants, local businesses and people to understand their unique needs in terms of access to volunteering (whether as potential volunteers or as host organisations), and whilst this approach was very effective in building trust and understanding, it took considerable time. Particularly due to the local environment, where there was a lot of scepticism about engaging in new projects, where localised communities have unique needs that they feel are often misunderstood, and where the voluntary sector appears coloured by feelings of scarcity and competition, this was deemed the correct approach and was well received within the community.

4. Ultimately, it was difficult to recruit Ambassadors to the project - potential volunteers who were generally sceptical to engage at all (due to widespread reluctance to engage in formal programmes like this one across our local area) weren't interested in signing on to advocate for a programme that was new and they had little connection to. This part of the project design was eventually dropped. By the end of the first year, we were very happy with the progress of the project and felt that we were well-positioned for continued progress. At this stage however, we had less volunteers registered to the programme than we perhaps would have anticipated at the outset, due almost certainly to the delay in starting the project, and the knock-on effects that this had to the rest of the project timeline. Whilst we were still optimistic that the programme would grow significantly over the lifetime of the project, we sought to revise targets with Spirit of 2012 to better reflect the progression of the project up to that point. Our approach to recruitment had been very localised and person specific, allowing us to reach individuals who otherwise might never have considered taking part in a volunteering activity - we believed that revised targets would allow us to continue to work in a high-quality, localised way.
5. A challenge in the second part of year one was that many sectors had seen a significant drop in productivity over the summer period, meaning that volunteer recruitment was somewhat stalled. Whilst during the first year of the project, community response to the Medway Change Makers project had generally been very positive, there had been some reluctance from a handful of community organisations to engage with the project in a way that was meaningful. In particular, some organisations were reluctant to let go of their own volunteer recruitment strategies or volunteer management practices, even if these might be off-putting to potential volunteers (like lengthy and intimidating application forms). This could be linked to the sense of competition that was very much felt across the voluntary sector in Medway.
6. Considerable energy was given in the first half of the second year to resetting and revisiting our partnerships, which underpinned how our project was delivered. Due to significant staff turnover across the partnership, the previous period suffered from inconsistency. We dedicated time to revisiting partnership agreements and expected roles across the partnership, resulting in improved partnership working.
7. Overwhelmingly, our greatest challenge was capacity, which has delayed progress in some areas. The structure of our programme reflected staffing across a partnership, and the majority of the actual project delivery sat with the project manager, who was also responsible for planning and strategy. In a period of significant activity for the volunteers taking on new opportunities, the administration associated with volunteer registration, setting up opportunities, etc, was a significant drain on project manager time and meant that there was limited remaining capacity for planning of other parts of the project, such as sector engagement. As such, we recruited a part-time project assistant at the end of year 2 to take on some of these responsibilities, freeing up the project manager's hours to take on these tasks, seeing greater overall project outcomes, and catching up on some areas of the budget where we were underspent for this reason. Whilst the Project Assistant only came into post in July 2024, the impact on workload due to increased capacity was already obvious and allowed strides to be made that previously weren't possible by September 2024.
8. We had been reluctant to organise social or networking events for our volunteers because the cohort was relatively small and engagement tended to be one off or quite light touch - we were aware that many of our volunteers were attracted to this programme because they can engage in a limited, scaled back way, and as such their emotional attachment to the project was probably not that intense. **That said, we were starting to see evidence of a core group of volunteers who were**



**regularly engaging and who continued to take on new volunteering opportunities at a range of host organisations. One of the volunteers suggested that a networking event would be of interest, and so we planned one for the end of October 2024.** We still were wary that the event may not be highly attended; anecdotally, we'd heard from the other projects supported by the Volunteering Cities programme that their social events have struggled in this way. We have held two social events to date, both well attended and lively. We noted that the most attractive aspect about this project to many of our participants is its light-touch nature. In Medway, where there is a lot of general scepticism about engaging with formal programmes like ours, being able to sign on and engage more lightly is less intimidating and therefore more accessible. As such, we struggled to launch the Level 3 Ambassadors volunteers programme in the way that we originally hoped. Initially, it was hoped that a core group of more engaged volunteers ('Ambassadors') would support the development and delivery of the project, as well as its promotion and recruitment of new volunteers, particularly from target demographics. It has proved nearly impossible to recruit individuals to take on these roles. This may be that this is mostly an issue of timing - however perhaps it was naive to assume that volunteers would be willing to sign on to engage, on a high level, with a project whose Unique Selling Point (USP) is that it is easy and low impact to engage with, to endorse a programme that at the time had not existed for very long at all. By the time the project was embedded and had a good track record, it then began to feel disingenuous to try to recruit people into these roles in the knowledge that the grant funding would end in 2025 and that this role may not exist going forward. Had the project had another year or two of funding in its original form, it would, in its last six months, be much better placed to launch an Ambassadors scheme because the volunteering programme was well established and had a cohort of micro volunteers, some of whom may have been interested in stepping up to a more significant role.

9. We are also aware that barriers to volunteering exist that aren't captured by the collection of demographic data. Conversations with several of our volunteers suggest that this programme has enabled volunteering for those whose lifestyles made regular volunteering impossible, whether through time limitations such as work schedules and childcare, or socio-economic factors. Whilst we made efforts to recruit specifically from target demographics via links to community groups, this didn't prove especially fruitful. Our diversity statistics show that our cohort's levels of ethnic diversity are relatively similar to the general statistics for the population of Medway. We were keen to understand why our efforts to engage with new communities hadn't worked. We therefore planned a series of focus groups to investigate further the barriers to volunteering - utilising MVA's existing relationships with community organisations working with demographic groups who were statistically less likely to engage in volunteering to understand their barriers to engagement with more nuance, and to plan practical steps to support them into volunteering if they wish. Please see appendix 2.
10. As volunteer activity increased significantly throughout the project, it became evident that some event producers weren't willing or able to undertake the necessary work to adequately support volunteers. This included some large-scale organisations, who we had assumed had already undertaken some of this necessary input. This led to concerns about the respect for volunteers at events with these organisations who couldn't stick to timelines, produce documentation (such as risk assessments and insurance certificates), and provide adequate support for volunteers such as contacts and induction. Whilst this hasn't been an issue across the board and some organisations, whether new to or experienced at working with volunteers, were happy to adhere to our

requirements and show significant respect and care for volunteers, this issue has recurred regularly throughout the project.

11. The success of this project has been in the actual delivery of recruiting volunteers, establishing opportunities with host organisations, and connecting the two to make volunteering happen locally. This had been our priority going into the second year and ensuring that it was done with care and consideration to the volunteers and host organisations took up huge amounts of time within the team. Whilst we were confident that this was a productive use of time, as it drove our core outcomes, it meant that other areas of the project plan did not receive as much attention, for example training for volunteers, or cultural sector engagement. We learnt that we needed more capacity within our team for project administration and delivery. The structure of our project team across the partnership meant that whilst there were a number of very skilled and well connected people who were incredibly valuable to the project, there was only one member of staff (the project manager) whose role was solely dedicated to this programme, and their available hours weren't sufficient to cover the day to day coordination of the project and the wider strategic project planning and delivery. This resulted in an underspend in the budget, as some projects and activities we had anticipated delivering were not possible due to these time constraints. In hindsight, we would structure the staffing differently allocating more staff hours to project administration and delivery as this was very time intensive to ensure the equity of access to the programme for those with specific needs.
12. The start of Year 2 brought a significantly more successful Volunteer recruitment period than previously experienced. We received feedback from our partners at Medway Voluntary Action that they (as professionals from the voluntary sector rather than the arts sector) found the descriptor of cultural activity to be vague and hard to contemplate. We also received anecdotal feedback from potential volunteers that they found it hard to relate to the idea of the project generally, because they couldn't imagine themselves taking part in a non-defined activity. As such, we pivoted our recruitment to be based on individual volunteering opportunities, and those who expressed an interest were then given information about the project as a whole and encouraged to sign up.
13. In the first half of the second year, we became more insistent with our requirements when engaging new host organisations. Additionally, we were working with our networks in the sector to develop support for creative organisations who needed to improve their volunteering infrastructure with the aim of establishing a culture locally of volunteers being adequately supported and having their contributions being respected. We have repeatedly experienced issues in this area throughout the project. Systemically, host organisations have struggled to provide the necessary information and resources to ensure that Medway Change Makers volunteers have been well supported whilst undertaking volunteering activity. We hypothesised that this issue was the result of a combination of a lack of time and resources, but also ignorance to the needs of volunteers.
14. This learning inspired the Cultural Sector Round Table event that we held at the end of the second year in September 2024. Learning from this event helped to steer the future of the project to better support cultural sector organisations to improve the volunteer experience, for example through the production of resources and training responding to identified needs. We believe that this event helped us to better understand the cultural sector we strived to support, but also to communicate the importance of prioritising the volunteer experience. A significant challenge arose when working with new host organisations, which the project manager did regularly attempting to set up a varied and exciting roster of volunteering activities for our cohort. Host organisations were asked to provide some basic documentation (a risk assessment for an event, public liability insurance etc) and

were given timelines to adhere to. Some event organisers were unable or unwilling to stick to these timelines or produce this documentation. We also witnessed a number of organisations show little respect or understanding for how volunteers are recruited or should be managed at an event: requesting volunteers at incredibly short notice, attempting to use volunteers alongside paid staff in the same roles, failing to provide adequate detail on what will be expected of volunteers at an event or a contact who will support them on the day.

15. Prior to this project, our expectation was that particularly in the early stages, the volunteer cohort would consist of those who most easily identified themselves as potential volunteers and therefore aligned with national and local demographic averages for volunteering. In particular, national research suggested that older people (over 65) most frequently volunteer, aligning with anecdotal reports of what volunteers looked like locally from community partners who already worked with volunteers. It was therefore surprising that all of the volunteers recruited to the programme in the first year were aged 64 and under, with about half being between the ages of 16 and 25. This seemed most likely to be a response to face to face engagement work by the project manager who sat within this age bracket, evidencing the value of representation to encourage participation. If young people are more likely to engage in a project because they see another young person attached to it, this principle can be extended to other less regularly engaged groups. We aimed to respond to this learning through the recruitment of project ambassadors who represent key demographic areas that may face barriers to engagement.
16. As part of our sign-up process to the Medway Change Makers programme, volunteers were given a free form text box to share any skills, interests or experience they had that might have helped us to identify volunteering opportunities that might have suited them. A surprising number of respondents said that they didn't have any skills or experience. Whilst this wasn't one of our formal data collections, it did appear to evidence a level of low self-esteem that we presumed was shared by many Medway residents. We were hopeful that this programme could help its participants to not only learn new skills and gain formal volunteering experience, but also to identify the skills and qualities that they already had but weren't confident enough to name.
17. One impact on our final reporting is that we suspected some volunteers may have struggled to identify with the project as its own entity and therefore may have found it difficult to identify and discuss the impact that it has had on their lives. Whilst volunteers registered with Medway Change Makers were sent a welcome pack with a branded t-shirt and lanyard, and all the communications that they received were branded, their face-to-face volunteering practice was with their host organisation. As such, their experience with our project Change Makers is hugely impacted by the host organisation's event management and volunteer management practices, the people they interact with. We believed that this may have contributed to the volunteers feeling less aligned to Medway Change Makers and more to individual host organisations, confirmed anecdotally. We didn't think that this is a problem in and of itself and it definitely didn't apply to all volunteers, but it may be an important consideration when interpreting outcomes data.
18. We learnt that the project is most successful and most popular with our participants in its lightest touch form. Most of our volunteers worked full-time and had additional responsibilities such as childcare or studying and were attracted to this programme over volunteering in other ways because they could fit it around their existing schedules, engaging in events that are of interest to them and within their own timeframe. Whilst we had offered additional opportunities such as training (later in the project), our volunteers were most interested in the project's core business of connecting them with exciting, short-term opportunities.

19. Our approach in delivery was significantly (positively) impacted following the recruitment of a Project Assistant, increasing the capacity of the team, particularly in relation to day-to-day project delivery. Going into the last 6 months of the project, the Project Manager moved from 0.8 FTE to full-time working to further increase capacity in response to growing need from both our continually expanding volunteer cohort, our busier programme of activities and the need to plan for our legacy. No change to our budget was needed to facilitate this due to the underspend from the delayed recruitment of the Project Manager at the beginning of the project.
20. The second part of year 2, we felt very positive about the development of our project, and it continued to grow into a programme that was a significant asset to our local community. Perhaps our most obvious success had been in the considerable growth of the programme in this period. As of the end of August 2024, there were 148 volunteers registered for the Medway Change Makers programme, representing a growth of over 70% in 6 months, and since the project's inception, those volunteers had carried out well over 400 volunteering hours in the local cultural sector. A number of volunteers were now re-engaging (i.e. taking on second, third etc, volunteering opportunities, with either the same or new host organisations), demonstrating the value of the programme's light-touch but exciting practice of forefronting events-based volunteering.
21. Despite this, as we approached the final phase of the project in its current form, we identified ways that the project's original aims may not be best serving volunteers and cultural sector organisations in Medway as described above.
22. We identified that a considerable challenge faced by the programme was its time frame. In the markedly changed landscape of Medway since the original project bid was submitted, and due to delays in the early days of the project, it hadn't proved reasonable to deliver on all project aims with high quality and lasting impact. Notable differences were significant financial difficulties within our local council, a reduced programme of local cultural events due to this and cuts to funding across the sector on a wider scale in addition to a general increased scepticism and negativity towards formal programmes such as ours. These issues meant that progress was slower in some areas than predicted, in many cases for reasons beyond our control such as lack of capacity from event organisers, last minute funding decisions, and less events in general for volunteers to take part in. This issue of timeline problems was exacerbated by lack of capacity in the project team, which had a distinct effect on progress in this period.
23. We found there was a real sense of competition within the voluntary sector, making some community organisations reluctant to share learning, resources or connections.

## Legacy

For the last six months of the project and beyond as part of its legacy, we focused on making this core business work in the best possible way for both volunteers and organisations. With a team that had struggled for capacity, trying to offer a huge host of ways to engage had been difficult, and uptake from volunteers had generally not been as we had hoped. We thought it would be of most value to prioritise improving the experience of micro-volunteers at host organisations. We were also aware that there was work to be done to achieve this – particularly as we discussed elsewhere in this report, our cultural sector organisations struggled to meet the needs of volunteers, and many of the volunteers we worked with were new to the practice and needed support and structure. With a greater focus on this side of Medway Change Makers, we believed our outcomes could be more impactful in the final months and beyond. Ideas Test and Creative Medway explored a legacy for the

project and engaged the services of Achates to model, cost and create a fundraising plan for a future iteration of the programme beyond June 2025. Two possible options explored with Achates were either Ideas Test to take on the project or Creative Medway. For both organisations internal capacity significantly precluded this option. For Ideas Test, the project was not their core Creative People & Place mission and Creative Medway as a new CIC did not have the fundraising potential of a charity to enable enough successful fundraising at this stage. A timely solution was via [Tempo](#), who have a network of volunteering opportunities on a local and national level. Tempo is already established in Medway but are now pursuing funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund for a heritage and culture based Medway offer, similar to a successful heritage programme they run in Wales. It was agreed by Spirit of 2012, that the fundraising undertaken by Achates and paid for by the Medway Change Makers programme could be assigned to Tempo. Tempo have met with many volunteers to introduce them to their programme and its extensive range of benefits. They will take on the Medway Change Makers brand and uniform and identity assets. Creative Medway continue to support and signpost volunteers to Tempo via their website and communications, as will Ideas Test. Medway is currently a Heritage Lottery Priority Place and this increases the chances of future fundraising success for the programme. This solution ensures a legacy for the project and gives it real potential to grow.

Several Medway Change Makers volunteers attended the round table event mentioned above and at appendix 1 below to share their experiences of volunteering through Medway Change Makers. One volunteer presented at the event about what being a part of Medway Change Makers meant to him:



"The opportunity to volunteer [through Medway Change Makers] has boosted my self-confidence, mental wellness and happiness. The experience has benefitted me socially as I meet with and interact with new sets of people. I have had the opportunity to observe, advise and give feedback to the organisation I volunteered for. Unlike in an office setting, where targets and deliverables are at the centre of all and motives for work are salary based, the volunteering experience is from my heart and the motive is to create a lasting impact in people and the society in a flexible manner."

"Lexi and Philly (Temple of Kulture) are lovely people, it was a pleasure to support them at this event and look forward to working with them in the future."

"Good camaraderie between volunteers and the Fort Amherst team, a willingness to pitch in and help wherever required. A positive and pleasant experience, I felt appreciated and part of the team. It was a fantastic and well-organised event."

"Just thank you as it was well organised and I met some lovely people, really enjoyed working both days!

Felt useful and team seemed to appreciate my efforts."



"I particularly enjoyed assisting with prop making as I am a creative person. Regarding being an usher, we were given good instruction on what was required and lots of support during the show. I would definitely volunteer with Medway Change Makers again"

"This was the first event I volunteered at and I thoroughly enjoyed my time. It was incredibly rewarding to help out with Cosima at her collage zine-making table and it was clear to see how much the children enjoyed the crafting. I was on my feet pretty much all day, though I didn't mind, and I was allowed to take breaks if ever I needed a moment. The badge-making station was a particular hit with everyone, and once I learned how to use it, it was great being able to hand the children their little drawings as something they could wear. I'd be more than happy to volunteer for a similar event again!"



## Appendix 1: Snapshot summary of Medway Change Makers Roundtable Event

**Highlights from the report included the following perceptions on volunteering in the cultural sector:**

- Indispensable but Insufficient
- Under-appreciated Role
- Varying Definitions and Expectations
- Organisational Size Matters

**Challenges in working with volunteers included:**

- Hidden Costs
- Over-Reliance and Burnout
- Lack of Formal Structures, but not too formal
- Retention and Relationships
- Safeguarding Concerns



## Solutions and support needs included:

### Organisational

- Resources and Frameworks
- Flexible and Meaningful Roles
- Recognition Programmes

## Medway Change Makers: Providing Support

Moving forward, to support the sector, the programme will look to provide:

1. Volunteer Recognition and Training
2. Framework Development
3. Networking and Community Building
4. Skill-Swap and Networking
5. Celebration and Engagement

## Key Takeaways and Next Steps

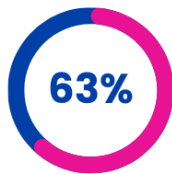
- Volunteer Management Needs Investment
- Flexible Solutions are Key
- Recognition and Celebration are Essential
- Change Makers' Role still required

A full report of the event, produced by James Gough (GJG Consultancy) who facilitated on the day, can be found [here](#).

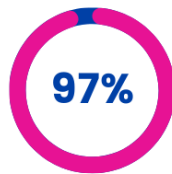


## Appendix 2: Focus Group Analysis

# VOLUNTEERING IN MEDWAYS ARTS, HERITAGE & CULTURE SECTOR



of participants were actively volunteering already.



of participants already volunteering would recommend it to friends and family.



of participants already volunteering in the arts, heritage and culture sector were doing so because it is something they have always enjoyed and/or cared about.



The majority of participants could all give examples of arts based activities, but knowledge around heritage and culture based activities was extremely limited.



Lack of expenses and not being able to afford to volunteer.



Participants feedback that a lack of time to give was an issue.



**60%** of participants got into volunteering through knowing someone already doing it. **75%** of participants felt that **how to get involved** in volunteering generally in Medway is **not clear**.



of participants felt that **how to get involved** in volunteering generally in Medway is **not clear**.



The biggest barriers to people volunteering were primarily 'perceived', outdated and/or incorrect.

70% of participants had either heard of or experienced that a volunteer's welcome into the organisation was poor and off-putting, and that groups were often clique.



of participants felt that Medway is unfriendly and only 4% agreed that Medway has a strong sense of community.

**20%**