



Luke gets into his role in the *Living and Working Together* Gallery.

Volunteerability at Eureka! The National Children's Museum, UK

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Accessibility to museums and collections is, for the most part, taken seriously within the international cultural institution sector. Within the UK, museums have also begun to involve disabled people in the development and curation of exhibition content, ensuring these reflect disabled people's history and experiences (two examples are Matt Fraser's 2014 travelling exhibition, *Cabinet of Curiosities*, at, amongst others, the Royal College of Physicians, and the Science and Hunterian Museums, London; *Recovery Flanders to Afghanistan* at the Thackray Medical Museum, Leeds).

Museums and cultural organizations are then beginning to recognize the importance of involving disabled audiences and reflecting their stories. Eureka! The National Children's Museum, based in the north of England, differs from traditional heritage settings in that exhibitions are predominantly permanent and exhibits are highly interactive. Galleries focus on experiences which are relevant to everyone – our bodies, health, transport, the environment and shopping. Interpretation is unique for each visitor as it arises from their own exploration and the way they interact with the exhibits. This makes the museum a very popular destination for disabled people of all ages, including adults with profound and complex disabilities.

Since 2011 the Museum has been running an award winning inclusion programme, Access All Areas, which provides services for disabled children and their families. While the Museum's visitor audience and marketing were beginning to reflect disability within the community, we felt there was space for a public facing role within the Museum team as well. We already had links with a local organisation, the Next Step Trust, which supports adults with learning disabilities and complex health needs and wanted to work with them more closely to provide a workplace experience for young people who would otherwise never have that opportunity.

This led us to apply for the Promising Practice ReImagined Award Program, run by the MetLife Foundation and Association of Children's Museums. The award funded skilled support staff to facilitate volunteer placement experience for young adults with severe and complex needs – we called the scheme **Volunteerability**.

The ACM award funded Volunteerability for a year, and our goal was to provide a full workplace experience for 4 volunteers who would apply for the role, attend an interview and participate induction training. They would be subject to the same expectations regarding punctuality, appearance, health and safety, customer service and workplace etiquette, and once a week for 6-8 weeks they would be regarded as a member of the Eureka! team. In other words, they would go through the same recruitment process as any other Eureka! employee – a process which would be tailored and supported to their individual needs.

We knew that careful preparation would be key to the success of the project and from the beginning, worked closely with the Next Step staff. The prospective volunteers and their carers came to a familiarization day which gave them a chance to visit the museum without any pressure or expectations. They were given a tour of the galleries and met the Eureka! staff who might become their colleagues. The familiarization process worked both ways too – it gave staff a chance to meet the Next Steppers, ask questions and begin to understand communication and other needs.

The museum's Visitor Services team and the Next Step carers did a "walkthrough" of volunteer roles in the Museum shop, and our newest gallery, All About Me, identifying barriers to the role and identifying ways in which these could be overcome. We tailored role descriptions to the strengths, qualities and interests of the young people put forward by the Next Step team. We advertised the volunteer roles in the Next Step Centre and invited applications. These were written with the help of support staff, who also attended the interviews where the Next Steppers were encouraged to "sell" themselves, highlighting their capabilities and enthusiasm for working in the museum.

Two successful candidates were appointed on a 6-8 week volunteer placement and completed the museum's induction process, as well as individual risk assessments. We were presented with a few challenges along the way, for example, when it came to emergency evacuation, one of the Next Steppers was unable to be moved from her wheelchair in any circumstances. No problem at the Next Step Centre, where all activities took place on the ground floor, however this Next Stepper particularly wanted to work in the museum's All About Me gallery, based on the first floor. With the help of the Next Step staff, we were able to reassure her parents that she would be safe in the museum's fire refuge area in the event of an emergency, and they consented to her working on this level.

It was vital that the Next Steppers' personal assistants undergo our induction process too and this presented some logistical challenges as the Next Steppers would be supported by a team of half a dozen across the 4 months of the placement. We overcame this by holding a separate group induction to ensure that everyone involved had been given the same information and the same opportunity to ask questions.

For some of the Volunteerability team, confidence with strangers was going to be a challenge, and so we gave them a few stock phrases to get them started, for example, asking how visitors were enjoying their day, what their favourite part of the museum was, etc. Other duties included helping our Enablers to explain exhibits to school parties, or directing visitors to our talking robot, Zoom. As the weeks went on, the volunteers' confidence grew, and this was a major benefit for all those who participated in Volunteerability. We measured impacts such as confidence, fulfilling the role requirements proactively and visitor interaction – this might be verbal or simply smiling. We carried out reviews at the beginning, middle and end of each placement, where we asked volunteers and their careers to rate their progress in each area, and to make sure that any difficulties were dealt with at an early stage.



Paul helps to price stock (left) and Sam puts stock away in the shop (right).

The Eureka! team were asked for feedback too. Disability awareness was already a core part of the museum's training for all staff, and most of our team had already delivered activity clubs for disabled children, which contributed to their confidence in working alongside the Volunteerability crew. Once the programme was under way however, the suggestions flowed thick and fast! We introduced pen portraits and photographs of the young people, which were displayed on our staff notice board. We also gave the Next Steppers a more active role in our morning meeting – teaching the team a new BSL sign, or showing them a game – all at the suggestion of the Eureka! team.

The placements conclude with a ceremony to which families are invited, and volunteers are presented with a certificate of thanks from our Chief Executive, Leigh-Anne Stradeski. Currently we run 3 Volunteerability programmes a year, managed by me as the Inclusion Manager, and our Team Leader with responsibility for volunteers.

Disabled people are often seen as passive recipients of assistance, and through this programme we aim to give profoundly disabled people a more positive profile within our local community. Throughout their placement volunteers contribute to the running of the museum, and expand our team's understanding and awareness of disability. By simply being there, our Volunteerability crew challenge the assumptions of the visiting public and reflect the inclusive ethos towards which Eureka! strives. How fantastic it would be if every cultural organization had a Volunteerability crew!

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