

# *Providing emotional support for archive volunteers: Methods used on the Manchester Together Archive project*

## **Executive Summary**

This guide presents methods that were used to provide emotional support to volunteers working with the Manchester Together Archive (MTA) during a partnership project between Manchester Art Gallery, Archives+ and the University of Manchester, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The MTA contains thousands of tributes left at spontaneous memorials in Manchester by members of the public following the Manchester Arena attack on 22 May 2017. The project worked with 23 volunteers in total and developed a programme that prioritised their emotional wellbeing. This guide was written in August 2020 by Jenny Marsden, project coordinator and digital archivist for the MTA, to share learning from this aspect of the project. The methods outlined will be of particular interest to archivists and other cultural professionals working with trauma-related archives, but could also be of use to archivists wishing to enhance the support they provide to volunteers more generally.

### *Key findings*

- Providing emotional support to volunteers can help prevent or minimise distress experienced as a result of exposure to trauma-related archival material
- Social support and opportunities for reflection on working with the archival material can be effective protective factors against mental distress
- Learning from experience and being responsive to change can help organisations provide emotional support to volunteers
- Providing emotional support for volunteers is time intensive and requires strong communication skills

### *Recommendations*

- Seek support from mental health professionals when designing volunteer programmes for trauma-related archives
- Put emotional support in place for staff
- Identify and invest in appropriate training for staff managing volunteers
- Learn about techniques for coping with exposure to distressing or disturbing material
- Aim to create a volunteering environment that is welcoming, calm, nurturing and non-pressured
- Limit volunteers' individual exposure to the material, for example by recruiting a team of volunteers
- Establish short debrief sessions for volunteers at the end of every shift
- Staff should be available to volunteers during their shift
- Staff should maintain an awareness of related external events, for example anniversaries.

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August 2020



*Volunteers Ellie Holly (left) and Jane Wilcock (right) cleaning items in the Manchester Together Archive. Photo by Emma Freeman*

### **1.0 Introduction**

This guide presents the methods used to provide emotional support to volunteers working with the Manchester Together Archive (MTA) during a partnership project between Manchester Art Gallery, Archives+ and the University of Manchester, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The MTA is made up of thousands of tributes that were left in St Ann's Square and other locations in Manchester by members of the public following the attack at Manchester Arena on 22 May 2017. The material carries a heavy emotional load, so project staff aimed to design a volunteering programme that supported the emotional wellbeing of volunteers. This guide shares learning from this aspect of the project. We hope the suggestions will be of particular use to archivists managing volunteers working with trauma-related collections, but the methods outlined might also be of use to archivists managing volunteers more generally. Engaging with archival material can be emotionally challenging for a variety of reasons, some of which might be unexpected, so the methods could be used to support volunteers working on many different collections. Not all of the methods will be appropriate for all projects or

volunteers, so practitioners can select what will be most effective for their particular circumstances, whether they are starting a new project or wish to enhance the support they provide to existing archive volunteers.

The emotional impact of engaging with archives, in particular archives relating to trauma, has begun to receive increasing attention from practitioners and researchers. A 2016 special issue of *Archival Science* 'Affect and the archive, archives and their affects' presented a range of approaches to exploring this subject across different archival settings, with the editors considering what greater understanding of affect and the archive could mean for archival practice and scholarship.<sup>1</sup> Practical work in this area includes research projects focused on improving the experience of accessing records for particular users, such as the MIRRA research project at University College London, co-produced with care leavers in partnership with the Care Leavers Association.<sup>2</sup> Attention has also turned to the emotional impact working with particular archives can have on archivists themselves,<sup>3</sup> with increasing awareness that processing collections related to distressing or traumatic history can have a negative impact on a person's wellbeing, in some cases leading to secondary trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout.<sup>4</sup> The Archives and Records Association have published a series of emotional support guides for people preparing to work with potentially disturbing material, which include techniques for coping during the process.<sup>5</sup>

Archive services often use volunteers to carry out processing work with their collections. Volunteering is generally understood to benefit the volunteers as well as the archive service, since it provides opportunities for volunteers to connect with people, learn new skills and give to others – all steps that can improve mental wellbeing. Archivists should be aware, however, that recruiting volunteers to work with potentially distressing archival material could have a negative impact on the volunteers' mental wellbeing. When an institution decides to use volunteers to work with potentially distressing collections, they have a duty of care to consider and actively support the emotional wellbeing of the volunteers. Prioritising the emotional wellbeing of volunteers in this way echoes arguments put forward by Caswell and Cifor, who call for an ethics of care in the archive based on 'radical empathy' which acknowledges 'the personal consequences that archival interaction can have on users.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anne J Gilliland and Marika Cifor, 'Affect and the archive, archives and their affects: an introduction to the special issue' *Archival Science* 16,1 (2016): 6.

<sup>2</sup> For more information see <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/mirra/2018/06/12/introducing-the-mirra-project/>.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, and Jennifer Douglas, 'Not "Just My Problem to Handle": Emerging Themes on Secondary Trauma and Archivists,' *Journal of Contemporary Archive studies* 6,1 (2019); Anne J. Gilliland, "Studying Affect and its Relationship to the Agency of Archivists Since the Yugoslav Wars". In *Archival Education and Research: Selected Papers from the 2014 AERI Conference*. UCLA. Report #: 2 (2015). Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6x27c942>.

<sup>4</sup> Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, Jennifer Douglas, 'Not "Just My Problem to Handle": Emerging Themes on Secondary Trauma and Archivists,' *Journal of Contemporary Archive studies* 6,1 (2019): 1.

<sup>5</sup> The Archives and Records Association's emotional support guides are available to download at <https://www.archives.org.uk/what-we-do/emotional-support-guides.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives', *Archivaria* 81, Spring (2016): 28, 37.

Over a 12-month period, MTA project staff recruited and worked with a total of 23 volunteers to catalogue and digitise thousands of tributes in the archive, including written messages, artworks, balloons, football shirts, flowers, quilts, decorative objects, candles, teddies, crochet hearts, wooden stars, jewellery, and a guitar amongst many other items. The project strove to create an environment that was welcoming, calm, nurturing and non-pressured, in which volunteers felt comfortable talking about their experiences on the project and their feelings about the material and the history it represents. The programme also received input from the volunteer manager at Manchester Art Gallery, and followed established gallery policies and procedures for volunteers, including, for example, expenses and the agreement made between the volunteer and the gallery.

The guide begins with a section on planning, including consideration of training needs for staff. This is followed by a discussion of the core elements that were put in place to provide emotional support for volunteers on the MTA project, and techniques that can be used to cope with exposure to distressing material. There is a section on recruitment of volunteers, and additional measures that can be put in place to support wellbeing, with a particular emphasis on creating a supportive volunteering environment. The guide then introduces further issues for consideration, for example maintaining awareness of relevant events and anniversaries, and the importance of providing support for staff. The final section shares feedback from volunteers about their experience on the MTA project.

## **2.0 Planning**

### *2.1 Know what volunteers will be working with*

Staff should have a degree of familiarity with the collection to determine whether volunteer involvement is appropriate. Preliminary work with the MTA showed that the vast majority of tributes, although created in response to a traumatic event, expressed sentiments of love and solidarity. The material is emotional but inspires mainly positive feelings. With suitable measures in place, staff thought the majority of the material would be manageable for volunteers. More challenging material can be identified and separated for processing by staff, or volunteers once staff know them and judge this would be appropriate. At this preliminary stage, staff might decide a collection presents too great a risk for volunteers to work with, and look into alternative options for processing. Note that it won't be possible to identify all potentially problematic material at this stage. Some distressing material might only be revealed through closer work with the collection, and, importantly, individual responses depend on myriad complex factors and cannot always be predicted. This was the case for the MTA, and the volunteer programme evolved in response to our developing understanding of both the archive and people's experiences of working with it.

### *2.2 Seek advice from mental health professionals*

Speaking to professionals with an understanding of the mental health issues related to the collection can be extremely helpful. The MTA project received advice from Anne Eyre and Jelena Watkins, who coordinate the Manchester Attack Support Group Programme. This connection was made through the [Network of](#)



[Spontaneous Memorials](#), an international network for people working with spontaneous memorials, established by MTA project partner Kostas Arvanitis at the University of Manchester. Project staff sought input on the volunteer programme before it began, discussed risk and prevention, and received invaluable support and advice throughout the project.

### *2.3 Identify additional training needs*

Strong communication skills are crucial to build relationships with volunteers and support them throughout the project, and training in this area can better equip staff to talk about sensitive or painful issues with different people. A project staff member completed the ABC Level 2 Award in Counselling Concepts, helping them develop their active listening skills and verbal communication skills through experiential learning processes. This training was undertaken primarily to support archive users, many of whom had a close personal connection to the Manchester attack, but the skills developed also proved useful when working with volunteers. Some workplaces offer internal training on staff wellbeing and having sensitive conversations, so make use of these if available. It could also be valuable to learn more about the mental health issues that could be experienced by people working with the material. MTA project staff attended free training provided by the Archives and Records Association on Managing and understanding Compassion Fatigue and Secondary Trauma, which gave a greater understanding of these conditions and how to identify and take precautions against them.

### *2.4 Identify existing available support*

If possible, extend existing wellbeing provision for staff in your organisation to volunteers on the project. Project staff contacted the HR team at Manchester City Council, which gave project volunteers access to the Employee Assistance Programme, and this meant volunteers could choose to access support without going through the project team. Manchester Art Gallery's health and wellbeing manager also invited volunteers to take part in staff mindfulness sessions. Both the Employee Assistance Programme and mindfulness sessions were already in operation, so this provision did not require additional staff time or financial resources. Projects should also signpost volunteers to relevant external support. For the MTA, this meant informing volunteers about the Manchester Resilience Hub, which has co-ordinated care and support for over 2000 people whose mental health and or emotional wellbeing was affected by the attack.

## **3.0 Coping with exposure to distressing material**

Techniques have been developed that can help a person cope if they encounter distressing or in some cases disturbing material in the archive. When working with volunteers, staff made use of guidance on 'Coping with Exposure to Disturbing Imagery' created by the British Red Cross Psychosocial and Mental Health team. The suggestions can be used for any record a person finds distressing or disturbing, not just images. They include:

- Grounding techniques such as focused breathing and squeezing your fingers to help you feel more grounded in your body.
- Not feeling forced to look at the material, or limiting the time spent looking

- Talking about what you have seen with others as soon as possible
- Preparing for unexpected difficult emotions, allowing yourself to feel these emotions and talk about them
- Avoiding further exposure.<sup>7</sup>

Being prepared before encountering disturbing material can act as a protective factor to minimise distress. When new volunteers joined the project, staff talked about what had been found already, explained that there might be more of this material, and shared the coping techniques. Volunteers were reminded of the techniques if they encountered something distressing, for example disturbing imagery, and were supported by staff to use them. Staff emphasised to volunteers that they did not have to look at or work with an item if they found it distressing, or thought it might be distressing and didn't want to look more closely. Volunteers were encouraged to bring such items to the attention of project staff, and the focus for the remainder of the session would be on supporting the volunteer. Staff returned to the item afterwards to process, package and label with warnings where appropriate. Discussions with volunteers about these items and their responses to them fed into considerations around managing access to these items. It was important that volunteers did not feel any responsibility to work with items that could cause them distress, and instead would alert staff. Much of the work that went into managing the volunteer programme was about creating an environment where volunteers felt comfortable doing this.

#### **4.0 Core elements of programme**

The following three elements were in place from the beginning of the project and formed the core of the project's duty of care for volunteers.

##### *4.1 Limited exposure to the material*

Each volunteer came in for one three-hour shift once a week. The aim of this limited exposure was to keep time spent with the material as a small proportion of the volunteer's life – they came in for three hours and then had the rest of their week away from the archive. The majority of the volunteers thought three hours a week was an appropriate amount of time to spend volunteering, although some would have liked to do additional shifts. It's worth noting that three hours is still a significant amount of time when working closely with archival material, and volunteers were encouraged to take breaks whenever they felt they needed to.

*The shift is a nice chunk, not too long, just enough to get into something whilst you're here.*

(comment during volunteer debrief)

##### *4.2 Regular debriefs*

Debriefing involves people coming together to share and reflect on their experiences, with the aims of promoting effective coping, learning, and helping minimise the risk of distress. Volunteers on the MTA project took part in a debrief

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<sup>7</sup> British Red Cross Psychosocial and Mental Health team. 'Coping with Exposure to Disturbing Imagery' (internal document supplied by British Red Cross).

with the project lead during the last 15 minutes of every shift. Project staff explained to volunteers that there might be an emotional load involved in working with this material, so the debrief would give them the opportunity to leave the emotion in the space rather than take it home with them.

Debriefs provided an opportunity for volunteers to share their feelings about the archive and volunteering, as well as discuss any practical issues. This dual purpose was helpful, because volunteers got used to speaking about the project with staff and other volunteers. Staff used different questions to prompt discussion in the debriefs, for example, 'did you come across anything that surprised you?' or 'was there any challenging material in the archive today?'. There was an emphasis on listening to the volunteers, encouraging them to reflect on how they were feeling and coping, supporting them calmly, and normalising their responses to challenging situations.

*The debriefs led by my supervisor allowed me to wind down from the session and the group meetings have also helped me to work through whatever thoughts I have had about the work. (Volunteer review form)*

The setting for the debriefs should also be considered. Ideally, they should be carried out somewhere private and comfortable. The MTA includes a comfortable seating area where visitors to the archive, including families of the victims and survivors, can sit, reflect and talk, and this area was used for the debriefs. During research about the project, one volunteer commented that the sofa area is 'where ideas come together. You might not think it's that important but it is.'

Incorporating debriefing into the shift as a regular part of the routine, rather than only debriefing when distressing material was encountered, was a deliberate decision. Regular debriefing can help prevent people becoming overburdened, allowing volunteers to share their feelings in the archive space, before leaving and carrying on with the rest of their lives. The content of the debriefs varied depending on the volunteers in a session, their connection to the archive, the dynamics between different volunteers, and the material they had been working with that day. Generally, discussion in the debriefs focused on items of interest and ideas about the archive rather than feelings and emotions, but on occasion emotions were discussed, demonstrating the necessity of providing this space. Staff should also make sure volunteers can speak to them one-on-one if needed. A selection of comments made by volunteers during debrief sessions are copied below.

*You never really know what's going to hit you. It's strange what it does sometimes. It's been an emotional one today.*

*Kids drawings are always what I'm most drawn to. There was one on A4 with a really tiny drawing in the middle. And the kids' stuff is really refreshing after reading a message of grief.*

*I find the personally dedicated messages the most shocking somehow – the ones that really make you feel something.*



*It was all quite emotional today, I think because of the trial going on.*

*I always find something to surprise me. I think about the history behind each item, who made it etc. I didn't think it would make me feel that way.*

*Working with the items, processing them, is like a tribute itself.*

### *4.3 Volunteer support group*

The support group was a facilitated peer support group providing a space for reflection on both professional matters and personal wellbeing. The volunteers on the project were usually volunteering in pairs, so we thought it would be helpful for them to reflect on their shared experience in a larger group. The support group was facilitated, in this instance, by a Chartered Psychologist, who also co-facilitates one of the Manchester Attack Support Groups. The group was scheduled to meet approximately every 2-3 months, for around 2 hours. Within the framework of the support group we also planned to introduce an element of psychosocial education, by inviting a guest to talk about their own experience of documenting the public response to the attack, but the COVID-19 lockdown prevented this from happening. Feedback from volunteers who attended the sessions was positive, and they appreciated the opportunity to spend time with each other. However, it proved difficult to find a time that worked for all volunteers, and take-up was fairly low.

Although the volunteers who attended found the support group helpful, overall, the support group facilitator and project staff felt the support group was not essential for these particular volunteers. The main benefit to attending was being with each other, which could also be achieved through arranging regular group socials. For other projects, it could be helpful to hold a support group session early on, then consult the volunteers and facilitator to determine whether there is a need for further sessions. Staff can also use debriefs to judge whether support group sessions are needed and arrange them accordingly. Holding a final support group session to focus on the project as a whole, in addition to a 'thank you' social, could support the volunteers' emotional wellbeing by providing an appropriate ending to their time on the project.

## **5.0 Recruitment and induction**

### *5.1 Role description and selection*

Staff used the gallery's volunteer role description template, but wanted to indicate to potential volunteers that material in the archive could be emotionally upsetting before they made the decision to apply. We thought carefully about how to phrase this. Martin Smith, the trainer for ARA's workshop on Managing and understanding Compassion Fatigue and Secondary Trauma, advised against prescribing how people would feel in relation to the material, for example by stating that 'the archive contains material that *is* emotionally upsetting'. All encounters with the archive are individual, and we did not want to suggest that

volunteering would be a negative experience. The text we decided to use was 'please note, some of the material in the Manchester Together Archive can be emotionally upsetting.' Where possible, project staff and the volunteer manager aimed to recruit a team with a mix of ages and experience, thinking this might help volunteers support each other on the project.

### *5.2 Informal one-to-one chat followed by group induction*

Prospective volunteers were invited to come to the gallery for an informal half hour chat. This was not an interview, but an opportunity to meet the staff member they would be working with, find out more about the project, talk about their interest in volunteering, and ask questions before making a firm commitment. They were also given an overview of the measures put in place to support volunteer emotional wellbeing, which some volunteers later reported was reassuring to them. This meeting took place in the gallery café rather than the archive, as the archive can be an overwhelming space, and we wanted to try and put volunteers at ease. Volunteers were shown photographs of individual items so they had a clear sense of the material they would be working with.

This informal chat also provided an opportunity to find out what somebody's connection to the attack was. We knew some people might be drawn to the project because of a close personal connection, and whilst that in itself wasn't a problem, knowing about it could help us provide appropriate support. This question was presaged by 'if you're comfortable sharing this with me,' so people didn't feel too much pressure to disclose. At the end of the chat, the volunteers were asked to think about whether they were still keen to be involved and let us know.

The one-to-one chat was followed by a group induction so that volunteers could meet each other, the wider archives team, and the gallery's volunteer manager; find out what they needed to know about volunteering at Manchester Art Gallery; and visit the archive. Volunteers were made aware that they could take time out from their shift if they needed to, and that they could always speak to the volunteer manager if they had any issues they didn't want to bring to the project lead. After the induction, staff considered which volunteers would work well together for the rota, although the overall determining factor was people's availability.

## **6.0 Managing volunteers on the project**

This section details how staff tried to create a supportive, calm and non-pressured environment for volunteers on the project.

### *6.1 Training, support and responsibility*

Giving volunteers adequate training for their role will help prevent unnecessary anxiety. Staff should allocate sufficient time to training, and be available to answer questions, especially with new volunteers. Volunteers should be encouraged to work at their own pace and should not be pressured to process a particular amount of material during a shift. On the MTA project, training was carried out on a one-to-one or one-to-two basis, with volunteers introduced to one task at a time.

Detailed written guidance was made available and updated in response to feedback from volunteers. The project lead worked in the same space as the volunteers and was usually present throughout the shift to answer questions and provide support.

Archive volunteers often take on a significant amount of responsibility – they are trusted to work with original material and they contribute huge amounts to the work of archive services. It is important, however, especially on a sensitive project, that volunteers are not overburdened, or treated as staff. Staff should discuss any concerns about the project with other staff members and project advisers rather than volunteers. They can be honest with volunteers about project progress, but should not do this in a way whereby volunteers start to feel anxious about progress or personally responsible for a project's success. Volunteers should also be protected from criticism of the project.

### *6.2 Range of tasks*

Once trained, and where possible, volunteers were given the option of switching tasks during their shift, as some tasks were more demanding than others. Cataloguing, for example, involved working more intensively with the content of the tributes than numbering, so switching could provide a mental break for the volunteer within the shift. Switching was also helpful as it encouraged volunteers to take a break during the shift.

### *6.3 Social contact*

Social support is an effective protective factor against mental distress. Social contact, talking about the items, and conferring with others can all be helpful to people working with potentially distressing material. It is good practice therefore to avoid a set-up where volunteers work alone with the material. At the beginning of the project the aim was to have two volunteers per shift to avoid any lone working, but sometimes a volunteer would have to miss a shift, disrupting this pair system. As stated above, the project lead was usually available during the shift so volunteers weren't alone in the space, and this was particularly important if only one volunteer was present. As the project progressed and more workspace became available, additional volunteers were recruited so there were three volunteers on each shift.

*It feels better working with somebody else, having company. Good to have somebody to discuss how you're going to deal with the material.' (comment during volunteer debrief)*

### *6.4 Opportunities for reflection and checking in*

Volunteers should have different outlets to reflect on their experience of volunteering. The debrief sessions and support groups provided opportunities to do this verbally, but written reflection can also be helpful, and will suit some people better. The project made use of MAG's existing volunteer review template, and asked volunteers to complete this after two months on the project, and then every two months for long-term volunteers. The review was a good opportunity to

check whether volunteers were having a positive experience and wished to continue, and whether any adjustments were needed.

When volunteers started, they were given a notebook and staff suggested they might want to use it as a mood diary, to keep track of their feelings, or just for private reflection on their volunteering experience. Later in the project, staff checked back with volunteers to see whether anyone had done this. Most of the volunteers hadn't, although one used it after every session, and said it had been very useful. One volunteer said they often thought about what they would write in it even though they didn't actually write anything. Other volunteers said the debriefs were enough, or they spoke to friends and family about how they were feeling. This suggests that encouraging personal reflection is useful (and giving a notebook is an easy way to introduce this topic) but it doesn't matter what form this reflection takes – it will be different for everyone.

## **7.0 Other considerations**

### *7.1 Being aware of difference and responsive to change*

Emotional resilience and responses to the material can be affected by a person's cultural background and life experiences, and might change suddenly depending on what else is going on in their lives. It is entirely possible for a particular item to trigger a strong and unanticipated emotional response. Staff need to be sensitive to this and recognise if somebody needs to take a break from volunteering, either during a session or for a longer period of time. Staff communicated to volunteers that although they were asked to make a 4-month commitment to volunteering, it was ok to leave before that if circumstances changed or volunteering wasn't working for them.

### *7.2 Reiterating the aims and purpose of the project*

Throughout the project, including the recruitment stage, staff made an effort to articulate why we were undertaking this work with the MTA, and communicate this clearly to the volunteers. Working with the collection can be demanding, so it was important to consistently communicate to the volunteers the value of the work they were doing, and show our appreciation for their time and efforts.

### *7.3 Awareness of external events*

Anniversaries, trials, inquests, media coverage and related events can all bring up difficult emotions for people, and volunteers might need additional support and guidance on how to cope at these times. Staff should keep up to date with related external events, and a good way to do this is to work with and sign up to newsletters from relevant organisations. For the MTA project, both the Manchester Resilience Hub and the Manchester Attack Support Group programme produced information which staff were able to share with the volunteers.

### *7.4 Additional activities*

Consider providing opportunities for volunteers to spend time as a group outside core project activities. MTA volunteers were part of a wider pool of volunteers at the gallery, and they were invited to various training and social events linking them

to the wider organisation outside their role. Project staff could also arrange training or a trip linked to the work the volunteers are doing but not the content of the archive. For example, the Digital Imaging team at John Rylands Library, who use the same photographic equipment as the MTA, ran two sessions for project volunteers at their photographic studio. They shared their expertise with the equipment and showed volunteers many of the different techniques they use to photograph collection items and support researchers. This was a really positive experience for the volunteers and gave them an opportunity to learn and bond with each other in a light-hearted way.

*I like the whole thing of volunteering at the gallery, getting the emails to say would you like to comment on a new initiative at the gallery etc., it's really inclusive. (comment during volunteer debrief)*

### *7.5 Learning during the project*

Some of the methods shared in this guide were not in place at the beginning of the project, but were implemented when it became apparent there was a need, as project staff endeavoured to act on their learning during the project. For example, training that improved listening skills helped staff support volunteers more effectively as the project progressed. It was very useful to have support from professionals working with the Manchester Attack Support Group, as they could be contacted for advice when new challenges were identified. Staff also paid attention to the effectiveness of the methods that were in use, in some cases recognising that efforts could be more usefully focused elsewhere.

### *7.6 Time commitment*

Running a programme that aims to provide a good level of emotional support will increase the already substantial time commitment involved in managing volunteers. Being present and responsive when volunteers are working, building relationships, facilitating debriefs, consulting with other professionals – all of this takes time. Our experience on this project, and the feedback received from volunteers, suggest this is time well spent. Archive services might consider recruiting a dedicated volunteer coordinator to develop and manage the volunteering programme, and budget for this in funding applications.

### *7.7 Support for staff*

If staff do not have adequate support themselves it will be hard for them to provide emotional support to volunteers. A narrative review of the psychological impact of spontaneous memorials made a clear recommendation that psychological support should be available to both cultural heritage professionals and volunteers working with this material.<sup>8</sup> The literature reviewed emphasised the psychologically demanding nature of the work, and was consistent with research on vicarious or indirect trauma from other professions.<sup>9</sup> A number of suggestions for supporting staff were made, including seeking support from colleagues or

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<sup>8</sup> Hannah Collins, Kate Allsopp, Kostas Arvanitis, Prathiba Chitsabesan, and Paul French, 'Psychological Impact of Spontaneous Memorials: A Narrative Review' *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*. Advance online publication <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tra0000565> (2020): 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 5.

mental health professionals, or training supervisors and peers to provide support.<sup>10</sup> Early on in the formation of the MTA, the archiving team accessed support from the Manchester Resilience Hub, including group meetings where staff were offered guidance and support on processing their emotions and looking after their wellbeing.<sup>11</sup> Kostas Arvanitis commented that this support was 'especially helpful in normalizing getting emotional [...] and processing those emotions in a positive way, by acknowledging rather than suppressing them.'<sup>12</sup> Taking this into account, work programmes and projects should be designed with appropriate staff support in place, whether through additional training, as mentioned above, supervision, making use of existing wellbeing provision, or staffing arrangements that avoid lone working.

## 8.0 Volunteer feedback on support provided

Staff encouraged volunteers to provide feedback about their volunteering experience during the session debriefs, on review forms, and on leaving questionnaires when they left the project. The leaving questionnaire included a specific question on support received from staff at the gallery:

*[Staff] have developed a really friendly atmosphere at the gallery where I feel comfortable asking for help when needed.*

*I was very well supported both in technical and personal aspects of my work, I have always been trained well and helped whenever I come across a problem and then I have also been checked in on to see how I've been feeling with the sensitive topic of the work we have been doing.*

*Training, supervision, encouragement, openness, being valued.*

*The staff were always there to let me know that there is support available for me in case I find the work challenging emotionally. They have always made sure to check on me and made sure that I'm comfortable and instructed me in the precautions I should take while working with the material.*

*[staff were] extremely supportive, ensuring we were comfortable with our tasks and had time to talk about our experiences. We also had a volunteer support group which was a really helpful and positive experience.*

*I felt comfortable and welcome. I enjoyed being part of a friendly and caring team.*

The support provided to volunteers was also mentioned as a positive aspect of volunteering in some of the responses on the review forms.

Review question: what has been the best thing about volunteering?

*The availability of support and the flexibility of the pace.*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 5

<sup>12</sup> Kostas Arvanitis, 'The 'Manchester Together Archive': researching and developing a museum practice of spontaneous memorials,' *Museum & Society* 17(3), (2019): 518.



*Getting to help on an important project and how supportive everyone is.*

*I've gained many new skills and it has been a very supportive atmosphere*

*Availability to talk, exchanges as equals.*

Review question: If you could change anything about volunteering what would it be?

*I am incredibly happy with the support I have been given as a volunteer. From the first induction right through the support has been more than I had envisaged.*

## **9.0 Conclusion and recommendations**

The volunteers on the MTA project made a huge contribution to the development of the archive – not just through the hours they spent processing the collection but also by sharing their thoughts and ideas about the archive during their shifts and in the debriefs. The sensitive and emotional nature of the collection they worked on asked a lot of them, and the project team had a responsibility to provide a level of support beyond what might be experienced on some archival projects. Feedback from volunteers suggests that the support provided was both effective and appreciated. A final point for consideration is that distressing or disturbing records can be found in all collections – not just those most obviously relating to traumatic history. Utilising some of the measures put in place for volunteers on the MTA could support the emotional wellbeing of volunteers working across many different archival collections, and help them feel valued by the organisations they give their time to.

### *Recommendations*

- Seek support from mental health professionals when designing volunteer programmes for trauma-related archives
- Put emotional support in place for staff
- Identify and invest in appropriate training for staff managing volunteers
- Learn about techniques for coping with exposure to distressing or disturbing material
- Aim to create a volunteering environment that is welcoming, calm, nurturing and non-pressured
- Limit volunteers' individual exposure to the material, for example by recruiting a team of volunteers
- Establish short debrief sessions for volunteers at the end of every shift
- Staff should be available to volunteers during their shift
- Staff should maintain an awareness of related external events, for example anniversaries

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## Appendix A: Providing emotional support for volunteers checklist

### Planning

- Review collection material
- Consult mental health professionals
- Undertake relevant training
- Identify available support within your organisation
- Set up emotional support for project staff
- Learn about techniques for coping with disturbing material
- Develop recruitment processes including informal face-to-face meetings and opportunities for volunteers to learn more and opt-out
- Research dates of related events and anniversaries and prepare additional support around these if required

### Programme management

- Design programme so volunteers have limited exposure to the material
- Set up regular debriefs
- Consider whether volunteer support groups are needed
- Develop workflows and guidance
- Schedule adequate training for volunteers
- Offer a range of tasks where possible
- Provide volunteers with opportunities for social contact
- Encourage volunteers to reflect on their volunteering