1. The importance of volunteering to the heritage sector

1.1 The heritage sector has a tradition of working with volunteers. According to DCMS’ Taking Part survey, an estimated 5.5% of the adult population in England has undertaken some volunteering activity in heritage over the last 12 months (2018/19). This is an increase from the 5.1% reported the previous year, reflecting a year-on-year growing trend.

1.2 The UK is internationally recognised as being in the forefront of using volunteers as a critical part of a dynamic, inclusive and forward-looking heritage management system. There are a large number of volunteer-led heritage organisations with no paid staff, as well many heritage organisations who use volunteers to a greater or lesser extent. A very significant proportion of those organisations using volunteers have business models that are heavily dependent upon volunteers and cannot function adequately without them.

2. The benefits of the volunteering to the economy and to people

Economic benefits:

2.1 The Centre for Economics and Business Research conservatively estimates the economic value of heritage volunteers to be in the region of £520m a year, based on the national minimum wage in England.

2.2 The contribution to individual organisations is considerable. For example, the National Trust has one of the largest volunteer workforces, with 65,000 volunteers donating over 4.8m hours of unpaid work in 2018/19.

Social benefits:

2.3 Participating in heritage volunteering activity brings a wide range of social benefits to the individuals involved, with 75% claiming a significant increase in their wellbeing after a year, 60% reporting sustained wellbeing benefits over 2-3 years, and 30% finding employment as a result of their volunteering experience.

2.4 In-depth studies on the importance of volunteering for heritage volunteers have demonstrated that:

- heritage volunteering improved skills and learning and social connectivity as well as general wellbeing (The What Works Centre for Wellbeing)

- heritage spaces can be highly effective for tackling social needs and supporting essential local services that improve wider quality of life. An evaluation of the Inspiring Futures project in greater Manchester found that 75% of volunteers reported a significant increase in wellbeing after a year, 60% reported sustained
wellbeing over 2-3 years. 30% of volunteers found employment or other opportunities for getting into work. For every £1 invested approximately £3.50 of social and economic return was generated (Envoy Partnership 2017).

2.5 Heritage increases social connectivity and strengthens our relationships with others. 81% of heritage volunteers that took part in a cross-cultural museum sector study, reported improvements in social connectivity. The study used qualitative evidence from a sample of 481 volunteers at five museums across three countries (Norway, Denmark and Sweden) in 2015 (Christidou and Hansen 2015).

2.6 Heritage volunteering helps people stay socially connected, socialise and create new friends. The National Lottery Heritage Fund’s (NLHF) evaluation of volunteering projects found that the majority of the volunteers surveyed (over 90%) reported benefits from socialising with others, while 35% sustained friendships outside of the project (BOP Consulting 2011).

2.7 There are many motivating factors for volunteering in heritage, sport and culture, with the most common being a desire to improve things, help people, and the cause being really important to the individuals concerned.

3. Challenges for heritage sector volunteering in the light of Covid-19

3.1 The recent Heritage Fund survey found that 82% of respondents reported a high or moderate risk to their organisation’s long-term viability and 46% of organisations can survive for no more than six months.

3.2 Volunteering is central to the delivery model of many heritage organisations. Almost all volunteering has stopped at heritage sites, and there is currently with an unknown timeline of when volunteers can resume their roles. This makes it difficult to communicate positive messages to keep volunteers ‘loyal’ to a particular organisation.

3.3 Just over 50% of the heritage volunteer workforce are aged over 50, in comparison to only 24% of those in the arts sector and 19% of those volunteering in the sports sector. Many heritage volunteers are therefore in the vulnerable category, so even when sites do open, these volunteers may still be sheltering or be unable or unwilling to volunteer any longer. This is likely to create a significant shortfall in volunteers in the short and medium term, and may jeopardise the delivery of funded projects which had been developed on the assumption of a certain number of volunteers and a range of skills that may no longer be present.

3.4 Many heritage organisations are in a precarious position as a result of Covid-19. When the country ‘opens up’ again these organisations are likely to need professional skills to support them e.g. accountancy, legal, HR, digital, fundraising, managing volunteers. Whilst a few better-resourced and larger heritage organisations may have these skills in-house (as paid staff or as volunteers) the vast majority will not, and many of these will struggle to get back to a stable position.
3.5 Many heritage organisations were in a precarious position before the current crisis – volunteer support could help build resilience and boost morale.

3.6 Often, when volunteers leave volunteering roles for long periods of time, it can be difficult to re-engage them. Volunteers may have found other roles with different organisations.

3.7 Many heritage sector professionals are currently furloughed and are very keen to give back to their sector as a volunteer. However, this can be difficult within the confines of the current furloughing scheme.

4. What the heritage sector can and needs to do

4.1 The sector needs to maintain volunteer capacity at end of the crisis to provide on-going support for small heritage organisations e.g. Industrial Heritage and parish churches especially at risk as often reliant on very small group of often elderly volunteers with no succession plan in place.

4.2 The NLHF and HE are offering immediate help for some heritage organisations and sites at risk and exactly how this will work in practice remains to be seen.

4.3 While individual organisations have been maintaining contact with volunteers wherever possible this has not always proved possible. Whilst it would not be appropriate for the sector to devise a unified model of volunteer engagement, this crisis needs to act as the trigger for more co-ordination and sharing of expertise, knowledge, training and other skills.

4.4 There is a great deal of good practice in the sector, in both large and small organisations, and while some of this has been shared, for example by the NLHF, the sector needs to find a way of sharing this more effectively and more widely.

4.5 The issue is particularly acute for small heritage organisations, for example, Industrial Heritage and parish churches especially at risk as often reliant on very small group of often elderly volunteers with no succession plan in place.

4.6 There are increasing opportunities to use digital solutions. This links to the NLHF ‘Digital skills for heritage’ programme.

4.7 The sector could produce a simple guide/template for how to pool, share and jointly develop volunteers but a large-scale nationally co-ordinated programme seems impractical.

4.8 The sector could carry out research to better understand:
- what skills would be useful in the sector to help organisations in difficulty;
- what skills would be helpful to volunteer-led and volunteer-involving heritage organisations now and in the pre-opening phase;
- the likely scale of the available resource and the extent to which they will match the heritage need;
- the relationship between the volunteer resource available and public sector input needed to deliver more effective heritage management in the future;
4.9 The sector, in the medium and longer term, needs to plan for the recruiting and retaining new volunteering capacity to help long term viability of heritage organisations.

4.10 In the longer term the sector should consider whether the benefits of a national volunteer resource bank for heritage to match need with skills (working with organisations that do this e.g. Do-it, Reach Volunteering, #iWill) outweigh the challenges of resourcing and running such a scheme. While such an approach will enable a co-ordinated sector-wide approach to citizen science, building on the success of programmes like the Big Garden Bird Watch, it will take considerable time and money to get to the point of launch and significant on-going resource after that.

4.11 Scope the opportunity for expanding or innovating specific volunteer programmes (for Historic England this could involve reinvigorating and expanding e-volunteering programmes, such as Enriching The List and digital photo archiving, or resurrecting the idea of engaging volunteers with the expansion of the Heritage at Risk register to cover a wider range of heritage assets that people care about. For others it might mean more micro- or person-to-person led volunteering opportunities, or working with younger age groups.).

4.12 Consider partnering with a volunteer bureau and get the heritage sector organisations in need to register. Promote volunteering opportunities in the sectors skills are needed (using professional umbrella bodies where possible) and ask them to register on the same bureau.

5. What government can do to support the heritage sector needs

Short term:

5.1 Inclusion in conversations regarding volunteering to ensure the heritage sector has visibility (in addition to the arts and museums sector) and that government understands the need and impact.

5.2 Resource to develop the solution – there may be an immediate short term intervention which requires a small amount of resource but more resource would certainly be needed to provide a longer term solution to make sure that the legacy of a current focus on volunteering is realised. Potentially a bespoke digital platform and a small centrally funded team.

5.3 Support for a message of volunteering beyond the current surge of interested related to community spirit around the virus

5.4 Recognise the negative impact on mental health of an extended period of social isolation, and the well-being benefits that volunteering can provide, the Government/ funding bodies could assist heritage organisations to support recovery by funding them to provide volunteering opportunities for the public. Without some kind of support many cash strapped heritage organisation may struggle to do so on their own.

5.5 Ensure there is flexibility in the furloughing scheme. There are people who have been furloughed who may now have time and skills to offer to local organisations (e.g. accountants, lawyers, facilities managers, business managers, fundraisers, HR, digital, staff from heritage organisations who have been furloughed, existing heritage volunteers). People are also getting
used to working from home and may be able to support heritage organisations from anywhere. Many heritage sector professionals are also furloughed, and are very keen to give back to their sector as a volunteer, which can be difficult within the confines of the furloughing scheme. It is envisaged that the opportunities to volunteer will initially be promoted to through professional bodies and associations e.g. The Law Society (who have established protocols and toolkits for Pro Bono work), the Institute for Chartered Accountants, the Institute of Fundraising, the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development etc.

Longer term:

5.6 Consider running a collaborative campaign with and for the sector to get people to return to visiting heritage when this is allowed – potentially on the back of Heritage Open Days. Align this with a wider campaign to get more people volunteering for heritage – building on the volunteering momentum gained on the back of the current crisis. Such a campaign could encourage people to join their local heritage society either as subscribers to restore funds, or as active members to share their skills and passion (to support national amenity societies with local branches, the county societies, local ‘Friends of …’ groups, civic trusts, specialist period societies etc.).

5.7 Support the building of a central volunteering resource to co-ordinate volunteering opportunities across the sector, advising organisations on the types of opportunities they could create e.g. micro-volunteering, volunteering from home, volunteering for short fixed periods of time etc. Continue to work in partnership with an established volunteer bureau (or create a bespoke one.)

5.8 Any new initiative will, of course, be done in collaboration and partnership with the heritage sector and will be successful as an enabling mechanism. It will build on the experience of those organisations with a strong track record of volunteering but will be focussed around succession planning as many existing volunteers central to the functioning of heritage organisations are elderly with no succession plan in place. Historic England itself does have a track record in creating imaginative volunteering opportunities which can be done in small increments of time and/or from home working remotely.