

2022-11-11

Volunteer management during COVID-19: The case of Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture

Samantha Morris

TU Dublin, samantha.morris@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/tfschhmtcon>



Part of the [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Morris, S. (2022) Volunteer management during COVID-19: The case of Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture. Case Study developed as part of the Sustainable Event Industry Knowledge (SEIK) Project. DOI: 10.21427/2V1S-3N30

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Tourism & Hospitality Management at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Other resources by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, vera.kilshaw@tudublin.ie.

Funder: National Forum for Teaching and Learning, Higher Education Authority

Volunteer management during COVID-19: The case of Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture

Samantha Morris, PhD candidate at the School of Tourism & Hospitality Management, TU Dublin.
samantha.morris@tudublin.ie

1. Summary

The European Capital of Culture is an initiative by the European Union to highlight the richness and diversity of cultures across Europe. Cities are designated for a period of one calendar year during which they organize a series of cultural events. In July 2016 Galway was awarded the Irish designation for European Capital of Culture for 2020. Over 1900 events across 154 projects had been planned throughout the year. The Wave Makers volunteer programme was created to help with the delivery of the event. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent restrictions imposed by the Irish government, required Galway 2020 to postpone events. The event was later 'reimagined' to run from September 2020-April 2021, with most of the events taking place either online or in person under strict social distancing rules.

This case study demonstrates how the Wave Makers programme adapted in line with these COVID-19 restrictions.



Figure 1: Members of the Wave Makers, image provided by Elena Toniato.



Figure 2: Galway 2020 logo (www.galway2020.ie)

2. Background and Methodology

This case study was developed using research undertaken as part of the Sustainable Industry Event Knowledge (SEIK) Project, funded by TU Dublin Impact, The National Forum of Teaching and Learning and The Higher Education Authority. The case study presented below is based on findings from an interview conducted by Samantha Morris, researcher at TU Dublin with Elenia Toniato, Volunteer Programme Development Manager at Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture

This research was carried out in March 2021, near the end of the Galway 2020 programme, and involved an online interview which was conducted over Zoom.

This case outlines how the Wave Makers adapted to the changes put in place by Galway 2020 as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. In particular, it outlines how the programme adapted to managing and engaging with volunteers online. Additionally, it shows how the Wave Makers found alternative volunteering opportunities in the community.

Key findings show that:

- Consistent online engagement is key to volunteer retention.
- Creative online activities can help volunteers stay engaged and motivated.
- Diversifying and finding alternative volunteering opportunities can help with the sustainability of a volunteer programme.

3. Setting a context

Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture represented one of the largest events in Europe and was scheduled to run from February 1st, 2020, to Jan 31st, 2021. A total of 1900 events across 154 projects, including 170 partnerships and collaborations with local, national, European, and international artists and organisations had been planned as part of the year long programme. Funding for the event was provided by Galway City Council, Galway County Council, the European Union, and private sponsorship.

- **Government restrictions and Galway 2020**

With the onset of COVID-19, just weeks after the official launch in February 2020, Galway 2020 made the decision not to proceed with scheduled events. The programme was later revised with both in person and online events scheduled to take place from September 2020 to April 2021. However, due to subsequent restrictions imposed by the Irish Government for reasons of public health, no in person events took place from December 26th, 2020 to April 2021.

- **The Wave Makers**

The Wave Makers is the name given to the Galway 2020 volunteer programme. Volunteers were recruited in several different phases which took place throughout 2018-19, these phases' of recruitment included a number of public events, social media campaigns as well as via the Galway 2020 website. A total of 820 volunteers were recruited, aged from 18 years to 70+, across 70 different nationalities. In their role, volunteers were required to assist with events running

throughout the Galway 2020 programme, including but not limited to exhibitions, readings, children's events, the Irish language, musical performances, and theatre, as required.

- **The effect of COVID-19 restrictions on the Wave Makers**

In response to public health guidelines, events scheduled from mid-March 2020 to August 2020 did not take place. Consequently, there were no opportunities for volunteers. During this time it was not known how long government restrictions would last or when in person events would be allowed to take place. As such it was important to keep the Wave Maker programme active so that volunteers were available when needed.

With no immediate volunteering opportunities available and no in person activities allowed, the Wave Maker programme faced three main challenges.

1. Volunteer retention
2. Engaging with volunteers remotely
3. Finding alternative volunteering opportunities

Challenge 1: Volunteer retention

With the onset of COVID-19 public health guidelines volunteers were contacted and asked if they wanted to continue their involvement with the Wave Makers volunteer programme. Additionally, several volunteers returned to their own country and were no longer available. As a result, the total number of volunteers dropped from a peak of 820 to 355.

Challenge 2: Engaging with volunteers remotely

From March 2019, volunteer meetups were organized on a regular basis and were an important social aspect of the Wave Maker programme. The last face-to-face meet up was a table quiz organized in January 2020. The volunteer meetups proved relatively successful and were regularly attended by over 100 people. With COVID-19 restrictions in place it was decided to continue with the meetups remotely. It was hoped that this would keep the remaining volunteers engaged and involved in the programme.

A number of online initiatives were put in place. A closed Facebook group was created, which enabled volunteers to keep in touch with each other. Additionally, from April to September 2020, online activities such as virtual table quizzes were organized. Themed activities, such as a food or music evenings, gave volunteers the opportunities to share and learn about each other's cultures. It was hoped that these events would be a good alternative to the in-person events held previously. However, these events were poorly attended, and in some cases only having 15-20 attendees. Nevertheless, Elena believed that these events were critical to the success of the Wave Makers, so much so that she continued organizing events even when she was placed on temporarily lay off for three months.

Challenge 3: Finding alternative volunteering opportunities.

During September, October and December 2020 following public health guidelines as set out by the Irish Government, Galway 2020 were able to hold several in person events. However, only 260

volunteers were needed at these events. With a cohort of 355 willing volunteers the Wave Makers started to look for alternative volunteering opportunities within the community. As such, the Wave Makers organized beach clean-ups and helped to ensure social distancing measures were in place at the weekly Galway Market. Twenty volunteers received training to work at Galway City Museum. Volunteers also wrote letters to residents in nursing homes.

4 Conclusions

With the onset of public health restrictions because of COVID-19, the Wave Makers volunteers for Galway 2020, had to change how they engaged and retained volunteers. Pre-Covid-19 restrictions, the volunteer meetups were well attended. However, this was not the case when meet-ups went entirely online, with these events having only between 10-15 attendees. While Elena believes it is important to keep that connection with volunteers, perhaps it is also worth investigating why some volunteers did not engage remotely.

Additionally, the Wave Makers had to look for new volunteering opportunities. By participating in community engagement, The Wave Makers have formed an identity in Galway, and Elena believes the group can continue to be a useful resource for the city and county, in three ways. Firstly, the Wave Makers can create and build a volunteering culture. Secondly the Wave Makers help with community engagement. Finally, the Wave Makers can take on an ambassador role for Galway city and County. As such she would like the Wave Makers programme to be include in the legacy plan for Galway 2020.

Key Questions

1. How important do you feel it was to keep volunteers involved during the COVID-19 lockdown and why?
2. Consider Wave Makers approach to retaining volunteers, and discuss alternative ways in which you might have gone about this.
3. What are the key challenges generally that events face in retaining volunteers and what approaches can be put in place by festival organisers to address these challenges.

References:

Galway 2020. Available at: <https://www.galway2020.ie/> (accessed 09 July 2021).

Interview with Elenia Toniato, Programme Development Manager at Galway 2020 European Capital of Culture, 31st March 2021.