



Volunteering in Nature

Access to Nature Early Findings

About Early Findings

This paper is one of a series being produced early across the lifetime of Access to Nature. We want to learn about what is working well for the diverse range of Access to Nature projects, and where they face challenges. Even in the early phase of delivery, projects are able to highlight their key learning. This may only be a partial picture of their progress and impact overall but nonetheless provides helpful insights to inform their future work and helps guide that of others. **Here we present the experiences of several projects that use volunteers as a large part of their Access to Nature delivery.** More Findings Papers will emerge as Access to Nature progresses and we can further build on what we have here to create a full picture of the learning from projects.

About Access to Nature

Access to Nature is a £28.75 million grant scheme to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those who have little or no contact with the natural environment. Funded by the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces programme and by Natural England, Access to Nature is run by Natural England on behalf of a consortium of major environmental organisations. This is a different kind of programme that aims to benefit 1.7 million people through partnership projects across the country. Funded projects include very local schemes run by small community based groups, through to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale is mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects including, for example, equipment to allow people with disabilities to access the natural environment across the South West; supporting minority ethnic communities to visit the countryside; as well as many projects which are providing a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people.

The Current Context

At the core of the Government's vision of the Big Society is the belief that people should be empowered to improve their communities and shape the services they receive. Access to Nature has a key role to play within this, through encouraging and facilitating community involvement and action at the neighbourhood level in response to local needs, particularly amongst those who have little or no previous contact with the natural environment. Volunteering is at the heart of Big Society which wants to encourage and enable people to play a more active part in society, and is equally important to many Access to Nature projects and to Natural England. It is not about volunteering for the sake of it but is about equipping people and organisations with the power and resources they need to make a real difference in their communities.

About this Paper

Volunteering has been at the core of many environmental and access projects for some time, and without the hard work of volunteers many of these projects would not achieve their aims. This is also the case for Access to Nature projects and this paper looks at the early findings about what has been learnt from them about the motivation, recruitment and retention of volunteers.

Volunteer Motivation

A key message coming from Access to Nature projects is that opportunities for volunteers to participate in the natural environment should be designed to meet the needs and motivation of prospective volunteers as closely as they meet the needs of the organisations and projects involved.

Volunteering has long been at the heart of environmental and countryside access projects. Traditionally it has been presumed by such projects that those involved have been motivated by personal commitment to environmental issues and to the countryside, often volunteering for conservation or restoration tasks. Access to Nature projects have increasingly come to understand that volunteer motivations are in fact wide ranging, and could or should influence the ways in which volunteers are recruited, managed, and retained.



Indeed, people volunteer for as many reasons as there are volunteers, but there is always a reason that is important to them. Research has shown that more than half of environmental volunteers are motivated by a commitment to 'the cause', and / or by the desire to help and to improve things¹. There are, however, other motivations that are significant, especially in certain sub-groups of volunteers. Younger volunteers are often motivated by the desire to gain practical skills while older volunteers are often motivated by a desire to share skills and 'give something back'. It is important to understand and meet these individual wants and needs in order to attract, motivate, and retain volunteers.

Key learning:

Understand volunteer motivations and use this information to inform recruitment and retention of volunteers

Typical motivations might include:

- Political commitment to environmental issues
- Appreciation of, or interest in, the natural environment
- A desire to be outdoors and working in the natural environment
- The need for social interaction with other like minded people
- Opportunities to learn new skills and build experience, perhaps as a way of gaining employment, either in the outdoors or elsewhere
- A desire to use, or pass on, existing skills and talents

Other factors may also be important such as the desire for rehabilitation, or to provide structure and meaning for a retired or unemployed person's time, or often just being encouraged to get involved by friends or family.



Project example: Volunteer motivations

Name: Change of Scene, Northampton - Northampton Borough Council

Beneficiaries: Young people from deprived estates.

Project: Offering new activities in the natural environment, including outdoor sports (such as climbing, cycling and kayaking), art based activities and residential experiences.

Volunteer roles: The project has volunteers within its management group and to support the delivery of activities for young people. They also plan to develop volunteers' skills and confidence to lead activities.

Learning about volunteer motivations: A high proportion of the project's volunteers are from the estates within which it works. Their motivation is to help provide something that will help young people on those estates to address issues of low aspirations and motivation, weak socialisation, poor life chances and vulnerability to negative outcomes such as involvement in anti social behaviour and drugs. For some it is a case of 'been there, done that' and a desire to advise young people about different life options. Some project participants have successfully moved on to a volunteering role.

*"The success of this strand of the project demonstrates that the balance of skills development and enjoyable community activity is highly attractive to young people and to adults seeking a channel for developing their skills. We are currently recruiting a number of volunteers who have turned their back on their track records of anti social behaviour and are now in a position to use their experience and their 'credibility' to act as positive role models for others vulnerable to the same poor life decisions. We have been delighted that two of our volunteers have secured paid employment after long periods out of work."*²

The project illustrates that 'making things better' is an important motivating factor for many of its volunteers. It has built on people's enthusiasm to help the young people from the estates and to offer them new opportunities that may help alter the course of their lives. It has benefited from young people wanting to stay involved with the project and to 'give something back' at the end of their own participation.



Volunteer Recruitment

Recruitment has always been a challenge for organisations that need large numbers of suitable volunteers. The recruitment process should start with considering what the project can give to potential volunteers. For example, it may be necessary to include information within recruitment material about the impact of the project, the training that can be offered or the social activities that may be available.

These messages need to be communicated in an appropriate way for the volunteers the project is trying to recruit. Social media such as Facebook, for example, have proved successful to communicate with potential and existing volunteers for some projects. However, volunteering and environment and countryside organisations' websites do not appear to reach new kinds of volunteers, particularly those from Access to Nature / project beneficiary groups.³

Key learning:

Recruitment messages should reflect the motivation people have for volunteering

Potential volunteers are easily discouraged by minor barriers to volunteering or by misconceptions about what volunteering might involve. Barriers to volunteering include:

- A lack of understanding about what is expected in terms of role and commitment
- The time and effort required to volunteer
- Money - for travel, clothing etc
- Lack of information about volunteering opportunities
- Differing perceptions about what volunteering in the environmental sector might require

Projects need to find ways to address these barriers.

Key learning:

Consider and address real and perceived barriers to volunteering

Volunteers may not understand what is expected of them or be worried that the commitment will be too great. Projects need to make sure that information to potential volunteers is very clear. Some projects have encountered problems when they have not been sufficiently clear about the volunteer task. Letting interested individuals 'try it out' may help. And finding out about what they want from volunteering and the skills that they have will help match them to the most suitable role for them.

Key learning:

Be specific about what is required of volunteers and the level of commitment needed

There is considerable evidence to show that there is a lack of diversity among the people who volunteer in the natural environment⁴. Traditional recruitment methods attract traditional volunteers. Using knowledge about motivation in recruitment is one way of addressing the issue, as is the use of different media to communicate the recruitment message. Projects that are successful in volunteer recruitment have also built on good links with local beneficiary groups, used established relationships with individuals from beneficiary groups, and created an environment of trust and support that overcomes some of the known barriers to volunteering.

Key learning:

Reaching new types of volunteers requires new approaches

All these approaches may make recruitment more time consuming and resource intensive. It is necessary, though, for projects to reach out to new people and extend the Access to Nature philosophy of encouraging more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those who face social exclusion or those that currently have little or no contact with the natural environment. Tensions may exist between adequate support and 'getting the job done' and these should be taken into account when planning a new project.



Project example: Volunteer recruitment

- Name:** Let Nature Feed Your Senses - The Sensory Trust and LEAF
- Beneficiaries:** People who have little or no contact with the natural environment and are 65 or over, have a disability, live in an area of high deprivation or are under 24.
- Project:** A national project providing farm visits to bring mental and physical health benefits to target groups.
- Volunteer roles:** The primary use of volunteers is in a team of Community Connectors. Their role is to network with groups from the target beneficiaries and to arrange visits for them with farmers. Other volunteers are used to provide office based support on specific tasks.
- Learning about volunteer motivations:** Let Nature Feed Your Senses is a national project and has therefore faced the difficult challenge of recruiting locally based volunteers without a local presence. Initially this relied on using existing contacts and networks, at a distance and on email communication. Coupled with a broad 'job description' that over complicated the required tasks, volunteer recruitment and retention has proved problematic.

Their learning focuses on:

- The need to provide a detailed description of the required tasks – good local networks with target groups were desirable but had not been specified so many volunteers coming forward did not have existing contacts to draw on
- The value of piloting the process by which a visit would be organised to avoid experimenting in real time with the resulting delay in organising visits
- The need to be clear about when the work needed to be done – contacting groups and farmers required a daytime presence and so the volunteer role was not suitable for people who worked full time
- People need personal contact to feel confident to volunteer
- Face to face contact is important and some form of regional 'volunteer recruitment' sessions would have been helpful

“One key lesson is that volunteers are recruited, retained and motivated when there is consistent face to face contact with their team members. Being part of a virtual team does not often match the need for social contact and to feel ‘part of a team’.”⁵

The result is that in its early days the project delivery was affected by the lack of committed volunteers who could undertake the Community Connector task as envisaged, while host farmers had been recruited and were waiting for visits to be organised for them. Recruitment and support methods have been adapted to provide a much clearer description of the volunteer requirements.



Volunteer Retention

There is evidence that volunteer retention in the environmental sector is generally good.⁶ However, it is not always possible to keep volunteers for long periods and some turnover is inevitable. Turnover needs to be kept at a minimum to keep valuable skills and experience within the organisation.

If the motivation needs of a volunteer continue to be met, this will help to keep the volunteer in the organisation. Finding out about the motivation of individual volunteers and monitoring changing motivations and volunteer satisfaction with their role will support retention.

Key learning:

Monitor whether volunteers' motivations are being fulfilled

Monitoring can be as simple as having an informal chat with volunteers or can be part of a more formal management process. Communication with volunteers about their role and their development is as important as with any formal job role. All volunteers should be provided with proper support and supervision that meets their needs. Usually, personal contact will be the best method of contact with volunteers as this can help them feel part of the organisation.

Supervision should give volunteers the opportunity to talk about their concerns and any problems they have so that suitable solutions can be found. Professional support includes inducting volunteers into the organisation; giving them a named supervisor; training them to carry out their role and having proper procedures and policies in place to deal with any issues that may arise. Continuing support will ensure clarity in the organisation's relationship with the volunteer.

Key learning:

Demonstrate good practice in volunteer support and management



Project example:- Volunteer retention

- Name:** VisitWoods - The Woodland Trust
- Beneficiaries:** Children, older people, disabled people and those experiencing social exclusion through economic disadvantage, all of whom are traditionally excluded from accessing the environment.
- Project:** Promoting the use of local, publicly accessible woodland for health, recreation and enjoyment through a VisitWoods website and local outreach work in two areas.
- Volunteer roles:** Volunteers are described as Woodland Web Guides. Their role involves visiting and photographing local woods, uploading information and images to the VisitWoods website, moderating content from other visitors, interacting with the public online and publicising woods via social media.
- Learning about volunteer motivations:** VisitWoods is operating England wide and shares some of the difficulties other national projects have faced in recruiting volunteers on this scale. Retention has also proved something of an issue; when managing volunteers at a distance it is very easy for those who are overloaded and disinterested to disappear. It has also been the case that during an intensive project set up period volunteer consolidation has not been a high priority and opportunities for one to one support have been limited.

Progress with volunteers is now progressing and key aspects of the project's approach to retention are as follows:

- One to one volunteer support is necessary
- Facebook has been a successful medium for maintaining contact with volunteers and for quickly and informally sharing updates, invitations, links etc.
- The Woodland Trust is setting up a forum for all volunteers which should add to the sense of being part of a team and contributing to something bigger
- The need to be flexible about how and when individuals can contribute to the project
- Flexibility needs to be balanced against the need to 'get the job done'
- Some volunteers require quite targeted tasks to keep them motivated
- Complex roles have been restructured into several simpler ones which are easier to recruit to when volunteers leave
- An understanding that a 'one size fits all' approach does not work well and makes little of individual strengths and motivations
- Engaging volunteers in the design of the website and tools they use has been very successful

*"Supplementary roles have evolved as the project has grown e.g. we now have volunteers who help us develop resources for children and community groups to contribute informally, and dedicated moderation volunteers who oversee counties without a local volunteer. It's hard to anticipate all needs and opportunities at the outset of a project, so it's worth building some flexibility into roles and staff time to allow for this."*⁷

VisitWoods has a clear understanding of what is required to increase volunteer retention levels. However they have identified the difficulties in devoting time to good volunteer management at times of intense project delivery, and when working at a national level. As the project progresses it will focus more on providing targeted and individual support to volunteers (which may involve revising internal targets to free up the time necessary), breaking tasks down into manageable chunks and providing more opportunities for volunteers to meet as a team.



Summary

Understanding motivation is key to effective volunteer recruitment and retention. For example, recruitment messages should reflect the motivations people have for volunteering; projects should address real and perceived barriers to volunteering; there is a need to be specific about what is required of volunteers; and reaching new types of volunteer requires different recruitment methods and messages.

Equally it is important for environmental projects to learn from the good practice that exists in this and other sectors around volunteer management, and to put that into place to help ensure volunteers feel adequately and appropriately supported in their role.

The headline message is that volunteering is as much about the volunteer as it is about the project needs or the environment. Volunteering is a two way street and so projects need to start with an understanding that volunteering begins with the volunteer and is not just about the project needs.

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