

How to... increase the range of volunteers and improve skills & knowledge

This short guide on increasing the range of volunteers and improving training in parks is based on the work we have completed with projects funded by the HLF / BIG Parks for People programme. To successfully engage volunteers and improve skills and knowledge, parks need to:

- Understand the current volunteer profile
- Develop a plan to engage more and different types of volunteers
- Develop a training and development plan for staff and volunteers

Understanding existing volunteers

To develop effective plans to engage new and more volunteers, it's important that parks understand who their current volunteers are, and the reasons and ways they get involved in the park. Parks can collect data on gender split, ethnicity and age to develop a profile of their current volunteers. This information is useful for:

- Identifying any under-represented groups in the local community to develop targets for engaging more and diverse volunteers; and
- Understanding the reasons why people volunteer in order to develop plans that meet current and future needs.

Developing a plan to engage more and different types of volunteers

Traditionally, volunteers in parks are members of a Friends group. These may not reflect the diversity of the surrounding community. The challenge for parks is to engage a diverse range of volunteers, by attracting groups who do not traditionally volunteer.

Parks need to develop plans to engage volunteers in a variety of ways. Don't assume that all volunteers will want to attend meetings and make sure that there are ways to get involved if someone has only a small amount of time to give. Ways to involve volunteers include:

- Planning and running events programmes and activities;
- As members of project steering groups;
- Consulting on plans and design work;
- Carrying out maintenance activities;
- Running tours and talks;
- Distributing leaflets and maintaining websites;
- Carrying out visitors surveys and counts;
- Horticulture works.

To engage hard to reach groups such as BME communities, parks should work with existing voluntary organisations or community groups to develop specific plans to encourage these groups to get involved.

Parks should attempt to involve volunteers in any redevelopment project at as early a stage as possible.

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Developing a plan to engage more and different types of volunteers (cont'd)

Case Study: Chances Park in Carlisle set ambitious targets to increase volunteers from a low baseline of 6 to 42. The first step was to establish a Friends of Chances Park. Volunteers deliver mailshots, helped out at the grand opening of the park, got involved in bulb planting and prepared a history of the park. Volunteers also helped out during the early stages of the project by carrying out tree surveys and visitor counts.

The project has also formed links with voluntary sector organisations including Mencap, RSPB, Barnados and the World Owl Trust in order to attract new volunteers to the park.

Case Study: Gheluvelt Park in Worcester has implemented a wide range of training opportunities for staff and volunteers. Training has been provided in horticulture, equipment maintenance, staff supervision and events and activities such as dog agility and Nordic walking. The training plan will enable both staff and volunteers to improve the management and maintenance of the park, as well as to support a successful activity and events programme. So far, 48 staff and 2 volunteers have benefited from the training.

The project is also using the Future Jobs Fund to provide work placements within the park.

Developing a training plan for staff and volunteers

To develop an effective training plan parks should:

- Identify the skills needed to manage and maintain a high quality park;
- Carry out a skills audit amongst existing staff and volunteers to identify gaps;
- Consult staff and volunteers on their training needs;
- Consider a variety of methods of training, including accredited courses or on the job training through work placements or apprenticeships;
- Evaluate the success of the training; what are the benefits to the people trained, and what is the resulting impact on the park.

Top tips

Projects have identified the following critical success factors to successfully engaging volunteers and improving skills and knowledge:

- Develop a range of methods for people to get involved;
- Beware of the dangers of over-reliance on a small number of volunteers;
- Continually review the volunteer and training plans, particularly after the capital works are completed;
- Work with existing voluntary sector organisations to attract more and different volunteers;
- Ensure that volunteer and staff development needs are addressed with effective training plans.