

Volunteering in the North York Moors

A Strategy

Background

Volunteers are at the heart of the National Park Authority and have contributed to our work from the very start. A Voluntary Ranger Service has been working for over 50 years and was the core of volunteer support up until the beginning of the 21st Century by which time it was contributing around 2000 days work per year.

In 2001, the Authority set its sights on developing a new Volunteer Service providing opportunities for people of all abilities and from all walks of life to contribute to all aspects of our work.

Over the following 13 years, this ambition has been largely realised and this Authority now has the greatest contribution by Volunteers of all UK National Parks with active involvement of people from a wide range of backgrounds, and of different ages and abilities making a contribution to many areas of our work. Since 2001 the proportion of the total days worked for the Authority which is performed by volunteers has grown from 4% to over 30% and volunteers now outnumber staff by about 7 to 1, working around 12,000 days per year, the equivalent of around 45 full time staff.

This is a wonderful achievement contributed to by many staff, members and volunteers. It means the National Park Authority is better able to deliver more, is better connected with a wider “constituency” and is providing many people with an opportunity to enjoy the place whilst helping care for it. This said, we do not feel that it is a “job done” and this new strategy sets the course for building on our existing work, developing new ways of working, changing the relationship between staff and volunteers and a continuing the growth in opportunities for people to work with us in caring for the area and helping people enjoy it.

Vision or Policy

Every strategy needs a vision. In this case the vision for the last thirteen years has been the headline policy and it is proposed that there need be no change to this, it has guided our work over the last 13 years, it is still relevant, it is:

People of all abilities and backgrounds and from all walks of life will be able to gain fulfilment through contributing to every aspect of the Authority's work

Principles

Four key principles will guide our future work:

- **We will develop a one team approach**, an approach that fully integrates staff and volunteers, assumes that every member of staff will be able to work with volunteers and that this will be the norm. It's about volunteers being perceived and treated in much the same way as staff, by staff. Its also about staff being confident and capable of working with volunteers and volunteers feeling confident and capable of being fully involved.

- **We will “let go”** and develop a more hands off approach to volunteering, accepting that in many cases volunteers are able to organise and manage their own work, given the right kind of support, training, equipment. This will enable more volunteering to take place safely and effectively without the need for as much staff input.
- **Volunteers will be able to contribute to every aspect of our work** – in theory, there is no limit to the skills and expertise that a volunteer can bring. The limiting factor is our capacity to recruit, support, train and manage their contribution, enabling safe and meaningful work both for the volunteer and the Authority. We will develop new ways of doing this.
- **Volunteering will continue to be for all.** We will continue to engage volunteers of all abilities and from all walks of life

With these principles in mind, over the coming five years we will seek to develop our work with volunteers in the following ways:

- More in-house volunteer groups
- A new approach to delivering field services
- Expanding “associate volunteering”
- Developing opportunities for corporate volunteering
- Creating opportunities for “virtual” or “remote” volunteering
- Supporting all staff to work with volunteers
- Supporting staff to be volunteers

It must be said that this strategy is not aiming to wipe the slate clean. We have an excellent and very effective volunteer service already. Many of the existing in-house will continue to operate and evolve as they have and there will continue to be an area based voluntary ranger service working with the Rangers. This strategy will enable us to work in new ways and build on these excellent foundations.

More in house volunteer groups.

We currently have six in house countryside management groups. They are largely run with supervision by staff from the Ranger and Volunteer Service teams. The barrier to expansion of these very successful groups is the lack of capacity to provide supervision. This limits the number and size of groups and prevents “new blood” coming in (often noted by volunteers). It is proposed that this barrier is removed by enabling and training some of our more experienced volunteers to provide supervision for some tasks. In most instances a trained volunteer, provided with all task details will be able to manage the task without additional staff input on the day. Existing and new volunteers will be invited to express an interest in this role. This is an approach used very successfully elsewhere.

We also have a number of other in house volunteer groups including the “Inspired by..” gallery volunteers, those helping with events and monitoring archaeological monuments. These groups provide an excellent example of how volunteers can become involved in more diverse areas of the Authority’s work. We propose to build on this by developing new opportunities which can be led and run by volunteers.

New Arrangements in Field Services

The recent changes in the Rangers and Field Services teams are challenging. Rangers have been key to volunteering, managing the voluntary ranger service and arranging and managing many work tasks. With fewer Rangers, this capacity is significantly reduced. It is proposed that this is countered by the changes outlined above and by enabling Field Staff – Maintenance Rangers – to take a greater and more independent role in developing dedicated teams of volunteers and managing volunteer groups. This approach has been developed successfully in the Community Access Project and by the Cleveland Way Maintenance Ranger. In this way, volunteers will become more an everyday part of the care for public rights of way and the Authority's properties. This change is already in progress.

Essential to the continued maintenance of the public rights of way network is a greater level of involvement by local communities. Rangers and Maintenance Rangers will work with local communities to identify individuals who are willing to take on the basic maintenance of key community routes. With appropriate training and equipment, and clear understanding of responsibilities and liabilities, these groups could play an important role in keeping key rights of way open and usable.

The Voluntary Ranger Service will continue to operate and evolve much as it does now. The way in which the two arms of the volunteers services are administered and supported will be brought more closely together but there will remain a distinct role for teams of trained Voluntary Rangers working directly within the area based Ranger teams.

Associate volunteering

There are many special interest groups at work in the National Park, some of whom we are already closely involved with via the Volunteer Service. These groups have special knowledge and expertise in some areas which is of great value. However, the need for task supervision has been a limiting factor in expanding this potential source of good work.

By removing the need for task supervision directly by the National Park Authority - by training, by agreeing health and safety responsibilities and public liability requirements and in some cases by moving to a position whereby the special interest group are working in their own right but on tasks identified in partnership with the Authority, it is possible for a far greater amount of work to take place.

A good example of this "arms-length" volunteering is the recent development with the Ramblers Association who are now carrying out vital survey and maintenance work on the rights of way network in the National Park without the need for day to day supervision. Associate volunteer groups may form around a special interest (such as Butterfly conservation) or around a particular site, area or community.

It is proposed that this will be expanded to other groups. Special consideration will need to be given and agreement reached in each instance as to each organisation's responsibilities and liabilities for health and safety, public liability and obtaining permissions, etc .

The Authority is also very much aware of the valuable contributions made to the upkeep of the Park by many groups and individuals not connected with the Authority but who share our aims. To encourage these groups and individuals to continue their work it's proposed we would offer support "in kind", such as access to a tool bank and provision of advice and training.

Corporate Volunteering

Experience elsewhere suggests that this is an area with potential for considerable growth both for volunteering and for income generation. Some other National Park Authorities have established corporate volunteering programmes for which they charge.

Having identified this as a priority area for development, careful consideration will immediately be given as to how best to approach the activity, for example whether the initiative should be delivered in house or outsourced to a specialist company as is the case in some other National Parks and what nature of work would best suit our needs and meet the requirements of potential sponsors.

Virtual or Remote volunteering

We will seek suitable opportunities for people to volunteer without the need to be on site or to have direct contact with the Authority and its staff through the use of modern technology. Areas of the Authority's work that could benefit from the skills potentially available could include researching and compiling reference material for reports, writing reports, supporting NPA projects, lobbying etc.

Supporting all staff to work with volunteers

There are few, if any, people working for the Authority who would not be able to do more if helped by the right person, with the right skills, the right training and the right equipment. Often, a barrier to this happening is the member of staffs understanding of how volunteers can contribute and their confidence in managing a volunteer or volunteers.

General and more specific training and support will be offered by the volunteer service to all members of staff to help overcome these perceptual barriers.

One further option in the drive to break down barriers between staff and volunteers is to enable staff to volunteer themselves. In instances where the member of staff can demonstrate a clear benefit to their work and personal development, a voluntary placement could be a new option in the training programme enabling staff to learn and experience volunteering first hand and in order to improve their own confidence in engaging volunteers in their own work.

Next Steps

It is proposed that implementation of the strategy commences immediately following members approval. The cultural change required will require long term action and the action plan sets out the key steps to be taken in the first few months. The Action Plan and associated targets will be reviewed annually.