

A guide to volunteering in parks and green spaces



STOCKPORT
METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL



Volunteering in parks and green spaces

Recruiting volunteers can be a difficult but satisfying process. Different sorts of volunteers may be needed, perhaps to help with task days or events, or to take on a committee role with a clear responsibility.

The important thing to remember is that volunteering should be at a level that suits the volunteer, with regard to roles undertaken and time committed, and it should be interesting and fun too! People are giving up their precious spare time and it's sometimes easy to forget that.

This guide looks at:

The benefits of volunteering

Volunteers are good for the community
Volunteering is good for you

Ways to recruit volunteers

Getting your message across
Promoting your group
Writing your recruitment message

Types of volunteers

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Recruiting and inspiring volunteers

Why recruit?
Inspiring your volunteers
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The benefits of volunteering

Volunteers are good for the community

- Volunteers not only supplement the work of parks professionals; they are an essential part of the fabric for the green space environment.
- They perform a range of functions which are essential to the character, social well-being, health and economy of this country
- Without the work of volunteers in researching, conserving, improving and fundraising, our green spaces would be seriously impoverished
- Many community groups act as an important link between the local authority and the wider community.
- They promote social interaction and a more active use of green space – from organising park events and task days to raising the profile of the park in the local press.
- Local community groups make an astounding and substantial contribution to the enhancement of green space.
- There are over 4,000 groups across the country and five years ago the estimated annual economic value in the UK of these groups was as much as £35 million*.

Volunteering is good for you

Those who volunteer for the green space cause have given the following list of personal benefits they have gained from their voluntary activities:

- *Improved physical health.* Practical conservation work can burn more calories than aerobics and cycling. And all that fresh air beats the gym - after a good day's digging you'll feel muscles in places you never knew existed!
- *Improved employability.* Try something different and learn new skills along the way. A survey by Timebank (the national volunteering charity - <http://www.timebank.org.uk>) revealed that 73% of employers would employ a candidate with volunteering experience over one without, as giving your time for free shows commitment. You'll also learn valuable organisational and communication skills from working as part of a Friends group.
- *More skills.* 39% of volunteers report an increase in their skill levels from the voluntary work they do.

- *Meeting new people and socialising.* The teamwork involved in tackling a task or running an activity in your park can be very fulfilling, and by working together you get the opportunity to meet other people that you may not normally socialise with.
- *Community spirit.* Volunteering can strengthen your community by bringing people together through your local park. You'll get to know your neighbours and others who care about your area.
- *Improved local environments.* All the hard work will make a visible difference to your park. From a simple litter pick to the installation of new play equipment, voluntary activity can make your neighbourhood a better place to live.
- *Getting the job done.* The simple satisfaction of achieving your goal is a huge personal boost.
- *The great outdoors.* Become closer to nature through your park and experience the beauty of the seasons. If you're not the world's best gardener it doesn't matter as you'll soon learn interesting and informative things from the other Friends and experts that they work with.
- *Improved mental health.* Take fresh air and an interesting challenge and add all the points mentioned above, and the sense of making a positive difference can't fail to improve your outlook and make you smile.

Ways to recruit volunteers

Most park Friends' groups have a small core group of dedicated committee members who meet regularly, but how do you get more people involved? The most important step is to promote your group and what you do.

Getting your message across

- Use a variety of different avenues and ways that will appeal to a range of different people.
- Decide who you are targeting and be imaginative in attracting them
- Target locations they will visit/read and tailor your approach accordingly
- Emphasise the importance of their role and what will happen if it isn't done!
- Be specific about what you need them to do
- Be realistic about the time commitment you will need from them
- Promote the benefits they will bring to the group and the wider community
- Emphasise what's in it for them - new skills, training, new friends etc
- Sell the variety of opportunities for them to make a difference - from helping with practical tasks and events, to designing your website or fundraising
- Promote how much fun they will have – remember it's their leisure time!

Promoting your group

Promote who you are and what you do locally in as many different ways as possible, remembering that word of mouth is one of the most effective ways.

- *Posters:* Your park noticeboard, local shops, supermarket community noticeboards, libraries, doctors' surgeries and community centres are just a few places where lots of people will see your poster. Remember to make it eye-catching, clear and concise to catch people's attention. *For more information on poster campaigns see our guide, 'Promoting – press releases, posters and radio'*

- *Flyers*: Before an event, why not distribute flyers to local houses telling people what's going on.
- *Newsletters*: A regular newsletter is a great way to get your message across. It need not be long, but could include news on projects you're working on, recent successes or challenges (to inspire readers to find out more or get involved), photos of past park events and listings of activities coming up.
- *Websites*: It is relatively easy and completely free to set up a simple online diary to promote your group. Visit www.blogger.com. There are also 'teach yourself' type packages (with website templates and help) online too. Why not talk to other groups and see how they have designed theirs? Having a website is a fantastic resource for your group and once set up it can be linked to other sites to raise your profile on the World Wide Web. Designing a website is a great way to get young people involved in your group –they are often the experts when it comes to technology!
- You can get your group listed on the national volunteering database online at www.do-it.org.uk. This is a one-stop shop for anyone looking to volunteer, and lists all kinds of activities that might interest someone near you.
- *Public displays*: Why not arrange to staff a stall for a few hours at a relevant venue (library, local events, markets or a shopping centre) to catch the passing public and promote your work? You could promote forthcoming task days or fun days, and collect contact names and addresses (and areas of interest) to form a mailing list to keep updated in the future.
- *Local press* is a fantastic way to reach out to potential volunteers in your area. Learning to write effective press releases (clear, concise and catchy) will help ensure your group receives coverage. Again, be sure to emphasise the range of different skills people can gain by helping out, and the benefits of meeting new people, getting some fresh air, making a real difference and having some fun.
For more information on dealing with the local press see our guide, 'Promoting – press releases, posters and radio'
- *Local radio*: There is a rapidly growing number of local radio stations who could provide you with free publicity if you have a good story to tell. To find out which stations exist in your area go to <http://www.radio-now.co.uk/main.htm>

or

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_radio_stations_in_the_United_Kingdom

- *Word of mouth:* Talk to others about your group and what you do – you might be surprised at what comes of it. Perhaps they know someone who's dying to get stuck in with some practical work, or has some experience of horticulture and would be happy to offer their advice?
 - Talk to other community groups. Find out if there is a local network or Forum of community groups involved with the environment. Many groups are happy to share their experience with others, so if there isn't already a network, then perhaps think of setting one up. Your local authority parks officers might be keen to help. For more about the benefits of Parks Friends Forums look at the "Friends of the park" community groups section of the GreenSpace Community website (www.green-space.org.uk/community). Perhaps another group could help out with a stall at one of your events (perhaps to promote their own work too), or a healthy living scheme near you might have a ready-made group of volunteers keen to lend a hand in your park.
 - Talk to your local school and get pupils out there bulb planting with you. Invite parents and teachers along to task days, fun days or carol services you may be organising.
 - Make contact with local companies. As businesses become more community conscious they are keen to encourage their staff to 'put something back' by helping out, either with volunteer time (litter-picking, graffiti removal or planting days) or expertise and advice, or perhaps even helping to sponsor or promote your work. This often goes under the name of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and it's well worth investigating what companies can offer – why not give them a ring and arrange to go and meet with them? (See also Business in the Community, www.bitc.org.uk.)

Writing your recruitment message

On leaflets, posters and press releases, make the opening message interesting enough to make people want to read on.

Get a balance between giving enough information and not so much that it may put off or bore prospective volunteers – keep them guessing!

Write simply and imaginatively to catch people's attention

Avoid the word 'volunteer' – it puts people off!

Try turning things round to be different and creative

E.g. 'I am a bulb and I need planting now, please come along and put me in the ground. I promise I'll flower just for you next spring....'

Or how about...

'Bird and bat box making event...I'm homeless! Please build me a home...'

Your message should cover:

- The need/the problem
- The solution – the impact volunteering could make
- The questions volunteers might ask – am I capable of helping?
- The benefits to them – what's in it for them?
- The contact point – how to get involved

Types of volunteers

Who to approach

The types of potential volunteers you could attract are many and varied.

- Tailor the opportunities you are offering to appeal to a range of skills
- Make your task days interesting and varied
- Ask volunteers what they are interested in to help encourage their continued involvement
- Be prepared to delegate a small project to them so they feel some responsibility for the work
- Contact local secondary schools to find out if they have students doing their Duke of Edinburgh Award and needing to offer volunteer time as part of this
- Consider approaching local interest groups with a related interest, perhaps in natural history or photography

Some useful contacts

- **Civic Societies:** Your local Civic Society might be able to help out with volunteers or support and will certainly be interested in hearing about the work you do for your park. They are made up of local business people and community members and could also help with funding for your projects! Look on the Civic Trust website (www.civictrust.org.uk) for contact details for your local Civic Society.
- **Rotary Clubs:** Make contact with your local Rotary club and enlist their help with events and activities. They are very active across the UK raising money for local good causes and running community events, often on a large scale – perhaps they'd like to hold an event in your park?
- **Business in the Community** is an organisation that promotes the idea of businesses getting involved with volunteering schemes and putting something back into their local community. 'Cares' is Business in the Community's national campaign to engage employees in their communities through volunteering. You can find a local contact at www.bitc.org.uk.
- **Pro-help** is a scheme managed by Business in the Community. It provides free professional advice and support to local community groups and voluntary organisations and will try to match volunteers with key skills to the needs of your group. This is free professional help with a range of things such as accounting, IT or legal advice. You can find a local contact at www.bitc.org.uk.
- **Engaging Young Volunteers:** V is the name of the independent charity championing youth volunteering in England. V exists to inspire a new

generation of young volunteers aged 16 to 25. To find out more go to www.wearev.com

www.vinspired.com helps young people find the right volunteering opportunity for their skills and passions, and 'vcashpoint' can fund new projects led by young people with grants up to £2500.

Recruiting, Inspiring and Retaining Volunteers

Recruiting volunteers can be very time consuming, but finding new people who are enthusiastic about volunteering and helping your group will benefit everyone. Most importantly, you need to retain their initial enthusiasm.

Why Recruit?

- To get a fair representation of the community - any constituted community group should be open to all the community to join
- To get differing views and new ideas
- To have a group with a variety of experience and skills that can work together.
- To create a sustainable group.
- To create a sociable and friendly group.
- To ensure that work and volunteering time can be spread between more people.

Inspiring and Retaining volunteers

- Consider what got you involved and try and inspire others in the same way
- Use events to recruit. Set up a stall at your park events with information about your group and take contact details of interested attendees
- Use your contact list to send out information about current projects to inspire new recruits
- Be sure people do not feel that they will have to commit more time than they are able to – every little helps
- Be flexible about the amount of time you expect volunteers to commit
- Not all your volunteers need to attend regular meetings – some may be more useful at practical tasks
- Build up a list of community members who you can approach to help out at action days, fun days or with a specific job just as and when they are needed
- Ask volunteers to fill out a short form like the one below to show their strengths, training needs and what they don't like to do. If it's interesting for them, they're more likely to keep coming back to help!

Special skills, talents, interests.....
Areas you would like to learn more about.....
No No's (please don't ask me to).....

- Make sure everyone is involved in the group's decision making - volunteers need to feel valued and listened to as members
- Make sure volunteers are given enough responsibility to retain their interest
- Recognise volunteer's efforts - saying thank you goes a long way
- Don't over recruit - make sure you have enough people to help at task days and fun days, but don't have people standing around without a job as this may put them off volunteering in the future.
- Why not give out certificates or badges at task days? People (especially children) like to have something to take away to show for their hard work.
- Offer small 'inducements' for help e.g. You could encourage people to come along and plant bulbs in the park by offering a free pot of bulbs they can take home with them afterwards
- Get inspiration or ideas by organising a social trip to a different park outside your area
- Reward volunteers by organising a barbeque after a hard day's work in the park, or set up a bouncy castle on a task day and offer children free bounces for their parents' work in the park!
- Remember to make the volunteering experience fun! Organise social events as part of the Friends group calendar to give everyone a chance to relax and get to know each other
- Making new friends is an important part of the volunteering experience for many people and all members of a Friends group have one thing in common - wanting to improve their local area

Getting specialist help

- Identify where you need help and recruit accordingly
- If you need your books auditing try approaching a local accountant, even if they just commit to a morning a year to review your accounts.
- Advertise the position like you would a normal job. Clearly outline the purpose of the job, showing what you expect from the candidate and what they will be responsible for.
- Be clear about what you will be asking from them and how much time you will be asking them to commit.
- Get in touch with Business in the Community about their ProHelp scheme (www.bitc.org.uk)
- Look at training someone in your group who is interested
- Investigate training opportunities through your local authority parks department, BTCV or Community Service Volunteers - www.csv.org.uk
- Training opportunities can entice volunteers to join your group, so emphasise the personal development opportunities they'll gain from the experience.

We are indebted to Stockport MBC for allowing us to use their Volunteer Pack for community groups, on which this guide is closely based.