

Natural England Commissioned Report NECR096

# Developing sustainable volunteering within the Natural Connections Demonstration Project: A review of evidence

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# Foreword

Natural England commission a range of reports from external contractors to provide evidence and advice to assist us in delivering our duties. The views in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of Natural England.

## Background

There is a strong body of evidence to demonstrate the wide ranging and long lasting benefits to children of learning experiences in natural environments (Dillon 2011). However there is also evidence to show the extent to which children are becoming increasingly disconnected from the natural environment (England Marketing 2009).

Both the UK Government and Natural England are committed to addressing this challenge by enabling better and fairer access to natural environments and thereby reduce the levels of children's disconnection with the natural environment.

The Natural Environment White Paper 'The Natural Choice: securing the value of nature' (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2011) sets out the need to strengthen the connection between people and nature, and gives an explicit call for every child in England to be given the opportunity to experience and learn about the natural environment. To help achieve this ambition, Government sets out several key reforms which include a commitment to removing challenges and increasing teachers' and schools' abilities to teach outdoors.

To identify and develop solutions most likely to be effective in increasing supply and demand for learning in natural environments, Natural England established a formal partnership with the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom and set up the Natural Connections programme. A Management Group was established to help inform and give perspective to the development of the programme with representation from across a range of sectors, including the Natural Environment, Green Space, Community and Volunteering, Heritage and Science sectors to . Organisations and networks involved included all those represented by the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom plus GreenSpace, Keep Britain Tidy Group, King's College London, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Network

(STEMNET), Sustainability and Environmental Education, Sustainable Schools Alliance, and Volunteering England. Some additional organisations were involved due to the scale and scope of their delivery, such as the English National Parks Authority, Farming and Countryside Education, Learning through Landscapes, the National Trust, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

The long term vision for Natural Connections is to enable all children within England to benefit from play and learning experiences in their local natural environments. Natural Connections objectives are to:

- **Stimulate the demand from schools and teachers for learning outside the classroom in natural environments.**  
By engaging schools (head teachers, staff, governors and families etc.) with a more compelling case for the benefits of learning outside the classroom in natural environments and giving them the confidence that they can overcome perceived challenges.
- **Support schools and teachers to build learning outside the classroom in natural environments into their planning and practices.**  
By providing better local face to face support to help teachers identify and access the local support and resources that are most likely to meet their needs.
- **Stimulate the supply of high quality learning outside the classroom in natural environments services for schools and teachers.**  
By providing service providers with insight about what schools need to support learning outside the classroom in local natural environments, including information on the key outputs and outcomes for schools, teachers, children, and local communities.

The Natural Connections Management Group reviewed the evidence and agreed the

interventions that they felt would be most likely to achieve the objectives. Four required elements were identified, including:

- **Establishing a volunteer development programme** – to test the role that volunteers can play in the menu of support services made available to schools in the delivery of learning outside the classroom in local natural environments.

Over the past few years, thinking around volunteering has become more sophisticated and nuanced. For example evidence has built a greater understanding of the factors that enable progression from individual participation to social participation.

Formal volunteering remains a tried and tested way to achieve community engagement and offers a way to deliver consistent and well-managed services. However there is growing recognition that informal, grassroots volunteering has enormous community impact. Doing something that meets the needs of family and community is a powerful motivation to volunteer, so parents, carers, extended families and governors all present an important local resource for Natural Connections.

This report (Unell and Castle, 2012) reviewed the evidence relating to volunteering and made recommendations for improving participation opportunities which may be helpful in designing the volunteer development programme within Natural Connections. Schemes cited include the promotion of family volunteering by the National

Trust and the promotion of micro volunteering opportunities via the Do Some Good app/My Urban Oasis. Volunteer Centres offer a proven way to access volunteers from harder-to-reach groups and to increase the diversity of volunteer teams.

Natural England together with the Natural Connections partnership used the evidence in this Report to inform the design of a 3 year Demonstration Project (2012-2015) to test and evaluate a new, sustainable delivery model that can support schools in England, particularly those in areas of deprivation, that are currently providing little or no learning in natural environments. Natural England's role in any future activity will continue to be in facilitating others to deliver.

This report should be cited as:

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**Further information**

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# Contents

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Executive summary	1
Policy context	1
Volunteering and community engagement	1
Involving volunteers in learning and support roles	2
Effective volunteer recruitment and training	2
Volunteering brokerage services in England	2
Measuring good practice in the involvement of volunteers	3
Introduction	4
Background	4
1. Policy context	5
1.1 Current policy on volunteering	5
1.2 Social action	5
1.3 Localism	6
1.4 Implications for Natural Connections	7
2. Volunteering and Community Engagement	8
2.1 How volunteering benefits communities	8
2.2 Volunteering as a localised, grassroots activity	9
2.3 Volunteering as part of a spectrum of community participation	10
2.4 Possible negative consequences of participation	11
2.5 Innovative approaches to community engagement through volunteering	12
2.5.1 The National Trust's Family Volunteering Scheme	12
2.5.2 The Do Some Good app	12
2.5.3 Incredible Edible Todmorden	12
2.6 Implications for Natural Connections	13
3. Evidence about involving volunteers in learning and support roles	14
3.1 Volunteering within teaching and learning	14
3.2 STEM Ambassadors	14
3.3 English Heritage Education Volunteers	15
3.4 Active Citizens in School Programme (ACiS)	15
3.5 School-based volunteering amongst City of London businesses	16
3.6 Young Enterprise	17
3.7 Implications for Natural Connections	17
4. Evidence about effective volunteer recruitment and training	19
4.1 Volunteer Motivations	19
4.2 Routes into volunteering	20
4.3. Recruitment from the perspective of volunteer-involving organisations	20
4.4 Investing in volunteers through training	21
4.5 Implications for Natural Connections	22

5. A summary of volunteering brokerage services in England	23
5.1 Volunteer brokerage	23
5.2 Volunteer centres	23
5.3 Online brokerage	24
5.4 Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV) Brokerage Schemes	24
5.5 Individual brokerage for skilled business people	25
5.6 Brokerage for retired people	25
5.7 Sector-specific brokerage	25
5.8 Student brokerage schemes	26
5.9 Implications for Natural Connections	26
6. Measuring good practice in the involvement of volunteers	27
6.1 Good practice standards in volunteer involvement	27
6.2 What does good practice look like?	27
6.3 Frameworks and toolkits for assessing volunteering standards	28
6.3.1 Investing in Volunteers	29
6.3.2 The Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit (VIAT)	29
6.3.3 The Volunteer Investment and Value Audit (VIVA)	30
6.4 External evaluation	30
6.5 Some guiding principles for evaluation	31
6.6 Implications for Natural Connections	32
7. Conclusions	33
References	34

# Executive summary

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This report explores the role and scope of volunteering in relation to the Natural Connections Demonstration Project.

The Demonstration Project aims to reconnect children with their local natural environments by stimulating both the demand for and the supply of services to support learning outside the classroom in local natural environments (LOTNE).

The Project will test, over 3 full school years (2012-2015), the effectiveness of a new delivery model in achieving this aim, with a focus on working with schools in areas of multiple deprivation that are currently providing little or no learning outside the classroom in natural environments.

One of the four required elements of the Demonstration Project is to test the role that volunteers can play in the menu of support services made available to schools in the delivery of local LOTNE.

## Policy context

The Natural Connections project interacts with many elements of the Government's current policy agenda, particularly moves to promote a 'Big Society' and to empower local communities. Furthermore, the localism agenda presents opportunities for increased community involvement in the provision and management of green spaces.

### **Recommendation 1: Build on existing programmes and policies**

Current government policy creates a number of opportunities for exciting and potentially valuable partnerships between Natural Connections and programmes such as the National Citizen Service pilots and the Community Organisers programme. There is much in common between the objectives of each and links should be proactively explored from an early stage.

## Volunteering and community engagement

The personal, economic and social benefits of formal volunteering are widely recognised. Less attention has, however, been paid to less formal types of volunteering within grassroots groups despite its huge impact on community life.

People get involved in activities that have personal meaning and value, often reflecting their current life stage. Volunteering opportunities need to be flexible so that individuals can choose the type of activity and level of involvement that is appropriate for them.

There is evidence that, despite generally positive outcomes, volunteering may sometimes have negative consequences for communities and individuals.

### **Recommendation 2: Develop a robust and comprehensive volunteering programme**

There is much good practice to draw upon for volunteer recruitment, support and management. The resultant model should include supervision, opportunities for feedback and reflection, and information about the outcomes and impact of the volunteers' work. Appropriate levels of resource should be provided, recognising that volunteering is 'freely given but not cost free'.

While strong structures should be developed to ensure a good volunteer experience, attempts should be made to avoid unnecessary over-formalisation which could deter some volunteers. In particular, links should be sought with smaller, volunteer-led and grassroots organisations reflecting the desire of Natural Connections to develop informal opportunities for participation.

### **Involving volunteers in learning and support roles**

Volunteers are widely involved in supporting teaching and learning in schools but there is little research into the factors that support their successful engagement. Evidence from five different initiatives suggests a number of indicators about what works for volunteers and for schools and specific learning points are drawn from each scheme in this report.

#### **Recommendation 3: Develop strong and meaningful relationships with schools**

Attempts to build an effective working relationship with schools should be prioritised from the start; in particular senior management support should be sought and a named individual should act as the main point of contact between the Project and the school.

### **Effective volunteer recruitment and training**

The design of volunteering opportunities should take into account the varying motives of volunteers. While most share a desire to improve things and help people, many will also be seeking to improve their own quality of life, for example by making friends or gaining a new skill. Studies have shown that word-of-mouth introduction is by far the most important route into volunteering, although there a number of potential drawbacks, such as limiting opportunities to a narrow group of people.

Once recruited, relatively few volunteers receive training for their role, although regular volunteers are more likely to be trained than those who are involved only occasionally.

#### **Recommendation 4: Promote flexible and varied volunteering opportunities**

Opportunities should reflect the individual motivations and aspirations of volunteers. Furthermore, flexibility should be promoted to allow people to take part in balance with their life stage and other external factors that could affect their ability to take part. A wide variety of formal and informal volunteering opportunities should be provided to allow for choice, including more innovative and creative practices such as family volunteering.

### **Volunteering brokerage services in England**

Volunteer Centres (VCs) offer a generic brokerage service for the geographical areas they cover. While VCs deal with a comparatively small proportion of volunteers they are particularly effective in recruiting young people, people not in work and ethnic minority volunteers. Do-it and Timebank are both generic national brokerage schemes that use web technology to match volunteers to local opportunities. Many brokerage schemes have a specific focus on employer-supported volunteering. Schemes also exist for specific groups, such as retired people, people with business skills and students, or within specific sectors, such as IT and media.

#### **Recommendation 5: Connect to existing infrastructure**

Natural Connections should capitalise on the embedded and establish links of existing volunteering infrastructure, particularly Volunteer Centres. These networks and local hubs should be utilised as a route in to the local community, aiding recruitment of volunteers in particular. Volunteering infrastructure should, however, be regarded broadly, and



connections should be made to student brokerage services as well as companies and their employer supported volunteering programmes.

### **Measuring good practice in the involvement of volunteers**

The past ten years has seen an emerging consensus across the sector about standards of good practice for managing and involving volunteers. Several frameworks have been developed to help voluntary and community sector organisations measure the quality of what they deliver and the effectiveness of their procedures and policies, including:

- *Investing in Volunteers* – the UK quality standard for volunteer management.
- *Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit (VIAT)* – an inexpensive, flexible, ready-made resource that volunteer-involving organisations can use for themselves to assess the impact of volunteering upon key groups of stakeholders.
- *Volunteer Investment and Value Audit (VIVA)* – a tool for quantifying the financial value of volunteering within an organisation as one measure of the difference that volunteering makes.

Independent external evaluation is a further option available to organisations wishing to assess programmes that have a volunteering element. It is important that the views of volunteers are sought separately from those of other stakeholders, their consent to take part in the evaluation is obtained, and they are offered specific feed-back at the end of the process.

### **Recommendation 6: Commit to programme evaluation**

Regular and comprehensive evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of the Natural Connections project should be built in. In particular, efforts to ensure that the voices of the volunteers are heard should be encouraged.

# Introduction

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## Background

This report explores the role and scope of volunteering in relation to the Natural Connections Demonstration Project.

The Demonstration Project aims to reconnect children with their local natural environments by stimulating both the demand for and the supply of services to support learning outside the classroom in local natural environments (LOTCNE).

The Project will test, over 3 full school years (2012-2015), the effectiveness of a new delivery model in achieving this aim, with a focus on working with schools in areas of multiple deprivation that are currently providing little or no learning outside the classroom in natural environments.

The objectives of the Demonstration Project are to:

- **Stimulate the demand from schools and teachers for LOTCNE experiences**  
For example by engaging schools with a more compelling case for the benefits of LOTCNE and giving them the confidence that they can overcome perceived challenges.
- **Support schools and teachers to build LOTCNE into their planning and practices**  
For example by providing better local face to face support to help teachers identify and access the local support and resources that are most likely to meet their needs.
- **Stimulate the supply of high quality LOTCNE services for schools and teachers**  
By developing insight into how to support schools with LOTCNE locally and by evaluating key impacts/outcomes for schools, teachers, children, and local communities.

The Project has four required elements:

- **Establishing an independent local brokerage** - between schools and the full range of opportunities and support that exist to support and progress local LOTCNE;
- **Establishing a volunteer development programme** - to test the role that volunteers can play in the menu of support services made available to schools in the delivery of local LOTCNE;
- **Establishing a participative web service** to signpost and enable better use of existing LOTCNE assets and resources; and
- **Delivery of an evaluation programme** - to provide ongoing evidence to shape and develop the delivery model itself and to capture impact and outcomes of the project for key beneficiaries such as schools, teachers, children, local communities and providers.

# 1. Policy context

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The Natural Connections project interacts with many elements of the Government's policy agenda. A school-centred approach to promoting learning in the natural environment, building on existing networks, skills and assets in the local community, is very much in-line with the Government's Big Society agenda. This section focuses on current policy related to volunteering, in particular moves to increase social action and promote localism, and draws out the challenges and opportunities this presents for Natural Connections.

## 1.1 Current policy on volunteering

The Coalition Government, formed in May 2010, has pursued a number of policies that impact upon volunteering. The Big Society agenda includes the ambition to increase social action, and a desire to see citizens take a more active role in their communities. The Big Society approach also includes opening up public services to be delivered by non-state providers including businesses and voluntary organisations, and community empowerment – transferring power from central government to local government and communities under the banner of 'localism'.

Government has stated that it is seeking to bring about culture change, to make social action a social norm. David Cameron said that Government 'must foster and support a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, [and] social action'<sup>i</sup>. This has pushed volunteering up the political agenda. The theme of community involvement and participation runs through much of the Coalition's programme for government. Policies include: the Department of Health's volunteering vision<sup>ii</sup>, the Department for Work and Pension's promotion of volunteering as a route into paid work through the Work Together initiative<sup>iii</sup> and DEFRA's Natural Environment White Paper<sup>iv</sup> which emphasises the benefits of volunteering in the natural environment.

Levels of volunteering in England since 2001 have stagnated, remaining constant at around 40 per cent of the adult population volunteering formally at least once a year, and 25 per cent volunteering at least once a month. This is despite the significant levels of investment over recent years. Therefore any moves to increase the levels of volunteering are likely to prove extremely challenging.

While Government has expressed its support for voluntary action, overall the level of funding available to support volunteering has fallen. It has been estimated that the voluntary and community sector is facing a reduction in funding of up to £3 billion over the next five years<sup>v</sup>. Local authorities – a major funder of many voluntary and community groups – face an average budget reduction of 28 per cent over four years from 2011.<sup>vi</sup> These reduced levels of funding are likely to create challenges for the Natural Connections project, which will rely on the strong local networks and organisations that are currently under pressure due to budget constraints.

## 1.2 Social action

Government has embarked upon a number of flagship policies, designed to facilitate and encourage volunteering and broader social action, namely the National Citizen Service (NCS) pilot programme and the Community Organiser Programme.

NCS is an eight week programme designed for 16 year olds, which incorporates outdoor activities, teambuilding, and social action. In 2012 NCS will be open to up to 30,000 young people, with the ambition that this will increase to 90,000 places by 2014. As part of the

programme, participants are encouraged to design and put into practice a social action task, based on their interests and local need.

NCS runs outside the school system, in the school summer holiday, and therefore while there may not be a direct link that can be made with the Natural Connections project, there are still likely to be some synergies. For example, the outdoor activity element of the programme has a clear overlap with learning in the natural environment. The organisations running the scheme will also be connected to secondary schools in their area in order to promote and run NCS. Therefore it is recommended that Natural England should explore how Natural Connections could be linked up with NCS providers.

Although there is no requirement for participants to continue their social action when the programme has ended, some NCS graduates may be keen to continue volunteering in some form, and may be interested in being Natural Connections volunteering champions. Also if the ambition of making the programme available to all 16-year olds is realised, the scale of the programme will present opportunities for more delivery partners, which Natural England may want to explore.

The Community Organisers programme, run by Locality, aims to recruit and train 500 senior organisers and 4,500 voluntary part-time organisers over four years. Community Organisers will be based in local communities across the country, to help people take a more active role in their communities and in local decision-making. The Natural Connections project could benefit from joining up with community organisers, as these local leaders will be connected to the voluntary and community sector as well as local residents.

The Government's approach to seeking to increase the level of individual giving in the UK – in terms of both time and money – is set out in the Giving White Paper<sup>vii</sup>. This paper is non-legislative, but describes how Government would like to work in partnership with charities, businesses, volunteer-involving organisations and others. Moves to increase charitable giving include promoting payroll giving and trialling donations through ATM machines. There is also a focus on how new technology might make it easier for people to volunteer their time. However, the recent *Pathways through Participation* project suggested that 'the White Paper does not put enough emphasis on the link between giving, need and personal motivations'<sup>viii</sup>The reasons why people volunteer are extremely important, and will be pivotal to the Natural Connections project. The challenge will be in finding volunteers whose personal motivations match the local need, in order to recruit effective volunteering champions. The volunteer roles will also need to reflect the fact that people want 'their contribution to be purposeful, useful and impactful'<sup>ix</sup>.

Government has created a number of funds designed to encourage giving, including the Innovation in Giving Fund, the Transforming Local Infrastructure Fund, and the Social Action Fund. Successful bidders for the Social Action Fund will be running national volunteering programmes. Whilst the first round for applications has now closed, it is expected there will be a second round in 2012. Natural England may wish to explore whether the Natural Connections project could benefit from bidding for the fund, potentially with partner organisations.

### 1.3 Localism

The localism agenda is primarily being advanced through the Localism Act. The intention is to devolve power to communities, and give local government greater autonomy. New powers in the Localism Act include the community right to challenge and the community right to bid for assets of public value.

The Localism Act will require local authorities to maintain a list of community assets, which would include land of community value. Communities can nominate assets which they believe should be included on the list. If these assets are to be sold, community groups will have the opportunity to put together a bid to take over the asset. Community assets, both buildings and land, can be a hugely important resource for local groups.

These new powers could increase community involvement in local green spaces, and therefore may prove to support the aims of the Natural Connections project. For example in some areas community groups may take over the maintenance of local parks by forming a Trust, and may be receptive to making the space more relevant to school children. Another example may be that a community group bids to run a school under the 'Free Schools' initiative. They would then make decisions on how the school would be run, including their approach to learning in the natural environment. However, while some groups may seize these opportunities to run services, others may not be so keen to take on the levels of responsibility required. A recent study documented that in some groups 'people felt cajoled into taking on more responsibility and committing more time, and became stressed or burnt out.'<sup>x</sup> People are motivated by issues that they feel are important to them, and therefore the Natural Connections project will need to build strong relationships with groups passionate about the natural environment.

Government has also set up a £30m grant fund for neighbourhood groups in the poorest areas of England. The Community First funding, administered by the Community Development Foundation (CDF), will allow local people to decide how to distribute the funds to community groups in their area. These communities could benefit from the Natural Connections project, especially where they are looking to improve their natural environment, or improve access to the outdoor spaces in their locality. The Natural Connections project may want to explore how it could support community groups to bid for this money.

## 1.4 Implications for Natural Connections

It is recommended that Natural England should:

- Make contact with the providers of the National Citizen Service pilots to discuss the potential for partnership with the Natural Connections Project. Areas that have the greatest potential for collaboration include:
  - The outdoor activity element of the programme;
  - NCS graduates may be potential 'volunteering champions'; and
  - Forming partnerships to deliver the programme.
- Connect the Natural Connections project to the Community Organisers programme, building on the ability of these local leaders to connect with the local, grassroots voluntary and community sector as well as local residents.
- Explore how the Natural Connections Project could capitalise on the new powers arising from the Localism Act, particularly the right to bid for assets; this has the potential to increase community involvement in local green space provision.

In addition, Natural England may wish to consider:

- How the Natural Connections project could support community groups to bid for money from the Community First funding.
- Submitting a bid for the Natural Connections project to the Social Action Fund, potentially with partner organisations.

## 2. Volunteering and Community Engagement

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This section reviews the positive impacts that volunteers make through formal volunteering programmes and their (frequently overlooked) commitment to informal, grassroots community groups. It also reflects upon recent research that places volunteering within a broad spectrum of different types of participation and looks at how people can be helped to move from one mode to another, while being mindful of some of the negative outcomes that can result from community involvement. Some innovative examples of community engagement are presented, based upon the principle of fitting opportunities around the people's interests and availability. Finally, some implications for Natural Connections are drawn out.

### 2.1 How volunteering benefits communities

Volunteering has long been regarded as an essential thread within the fabric of civil society, strengthening communities and promoting solidarity and commitment among citizens. This community-building function of volunteering was summarised and celebrated in a report issued by IVR and VE in 2007<sup>xi</sup> on behalf of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering. Based on a detailed analysis of the literature, it argued that volunteering sustains economic health and sustainable development, supports stronger and safer communities, and underpins social inclusion. Personal gains for volunteers were recorded in terms of the acquisition of skills and self-confidence, improved quality of life, and opportunities for lifelong learning.

On the specific question of the building of social capital and strong communities, the report quotes research suggesting that volunteers develop wider networks with people in their communities and can become more trusting of each other; the 2005 Citizenship Survey found that people taking part in formal volunteering activities had more positive views of their neighbourhood, were more likely to enjoy living there and to feel that other people had values similar to their own, and expressed higher levels of trust.

This report, like many in the literature, focuses on formal volunteering (i.e. a volunteer role within a group, club or organisation), thus outcomes for communities with relatively high and low levels of formal volunteering are compared. Similarly, attitudes and levels of well-being for volunteers and non-volunteers are contrasted.

In the past few years, research-based thinking about volunteering has developed a more sophisticated and nuanced approach. In particular, there has been a growing recognition that:

- Informal, grassroots volunteering, which falls outside the scope of much research in the field, has enormous community impact;
- Volunteering is part of a spectrum of community participation rather than its defining feature; and
- Participation may not always bring undiluted benefits, and that negative consequences for communities and individuals need to be recognised and managed.



## 2.2 Volunteering as a localised, grassroots activity

Investigations into volunteering have tended to direct attention towards formal organisations with paid staff and established structures for attracting and supporting volunteers. In comparison, grassroots community groups have received little attention despite the vast scale of voluntary effort upon which they depend. This possibly reflects the difficulties of conducting representative research within the fluid, constantly changing and complex world of community activism. As Natural Connections aims to build links within local communities, these smaller groups are likely to be very important since they are the vehicles for much local engagement.

There are indications, that grassroots volunteering has begun to move up the research agenda. IVR's report<sup>xii</sup> in 2008, based upon case studies of six community groups, looked specifically at volunteer leadership. More recently, IVR has examined the role of 'volunteers who manage other volunteers' (VMV's)<sup>xiii</sup>. While this role can be found in all types of organisation, it tends to be concentrated within that segment of the VCS composed of small, volunteer-led groups with incomes under £10,000. Another strand of research, reflecting growing interest in this type of volunteering, is the 'Below the Radar' programme<sup>xiv</sup> now being carried out by Third Sector Research Centre, focusing on small community groups that are not registered with the Charity Commission or other regulatory bodies, and/or lack a regular, substantial annual income.

Some themes emerging from these different research strands are:

- People who are active volunteers within community groups frequently demonstrate a very high level of commitment, particularly in terms of the time they give. This is particularly true of those who take on leadership roles;
- The voluntary nature such groups is seen as an essential part of their identity. People feel positively and passionately about their group being led by people who subscribe to the same values as themselves;
- Groups tend to function in an informal but consensual fashion. Although their activities may appear fluid and unstructured from outside, they operate within clear lines of accountability;
- Recruitment of new volunteers happens mainly through personal and 'word-of-mouth' contacts;
- There is a danger within the sector of trying to 'over-formalise' grassroots groups by offering systems of volunteer management, training and support that are inappropriate to their scale and informality. Training and support need to be shaped to meet their distinctive requirements;
- Community groups can make a big impact through their capacity to respond quickly and effectively, particularly in 'hard-to-reach' situations, and to work flexibly and independently;
- They tend, however, to be isolated from local infrastructure organisations and organisational networks that could support them; and
- They face risks to do with over-commitment and 'burn-out' of their leaders, inward-looking attitudes and an exclusiveness which may deter many potential volunteers.

## 2.3 Volunteering as part of a spectrum of community participation

The research into small groups highlights the multi-faceted nature of volunteering and community involvement. This theme has been expanded by a recent report that considers participation as a broad spectrum of activity. *Pathways through Participation*<sup>xv</sup>, presents the findings of a major qualitative study recently completed by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), IVR and Involve, which examines the factors that create and sustain active citizenship. The study was based upon interviews with more than 100 individuals in three distinct locations in England (urban, suburban and rural), drawing upon their life histories of participation and looking at the connections between different types of involvement.

It found that people's activities fell into three broad categories:

- *Social Participation* - the collective activities that people are involved in, including formal volunteering and involvement in informal community groups and activities;
- *Public Participation* - the engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of democracy, including voting, campaigning and lobbying;
- *Individual Participation* - the actions and choices that people engage in to denote their aspirations about society (for example, buying fair trade products, recycling and engaging in small acts of solidarity and kindness, such as visiting an elderly neighbour).

People got involved in activities that had personal meaning and value. They often had multiple reasons for taking part, and their motivations fell within six main categories:

- Helping others;
- Developing relationships;
- Exercising values and beliefs;
- Having influence;
- For personal benefit; and
- Being part of something.

Of particular relevance to Natural Connections at this preparatory stage may be the part of the report that examines the factors that enable individuals to move from one type of participation into another (e.g. from individual into social participation). Critically, there was a dominant motive (such as pursuing a belief, interest or skill), combined with an enabling factor, typically a local institution like a school, church or community centre, and with key individuals acting as a bridge between different activities and groups. The Natural Connections model of a community facilitator linked to the school would seem to resonate with these findings and indicates an opportunity for schools to act as a hub to link and facilitate participation locally.

The report's recommendations for improving participation opportunities may also be helpful. These include:

- Creating links and pathways between individuals and organisations through networks and hubs;
- Starting from where people are, taking account of their needs and interests. For Natural Connections, this will mean recognising factors connected to a specific life



stage -having children in school – which may involve adults in school-based activities, such as PTA groups, and also draw them into supporting sports clubs and other community-based organisations for children;

- Providing a range of opportunities and levels of involvement so that people can feel comfortable taking part;
- Using a personal approach to invite and welcome people; and
- Valuing people’s experience and what they do at whatever level of intensity.

In a separate paper, IVR has drawn out some specific implications for volunteer-involving organisations so that they overcome barriers to taking part and maximise participation.<sup>xvi</sup> According to this analysis, an organisation that is effective in community engagement should:

- Adapt recruitment processes in order to capture the personal history and interests of the individual;
- Ensure that volunteer role descriptions are clear and reflect factors that are important to the person concerned, such as social networking opportunities and flexibility;
- Track the impact of what volunteers do so that people feel their efforts are worthwhile;
- Be attentive to how new and potential volunteers are introduced and welcomed, and ensure that gatekeepers and ‘closed groups’ are as open and welcoming as possible;
- Ensure that group leaders are well-trained in running efficient meetings and managing conflict; and
- Provide opportunities to volunteer with friends and other members of the family, particularly with parents / carers / extended family introducing their children to volunteering.

## 2.4 Possible negative consequences of participation

The overwhelming conclusion from studies of participation, including volunteering, is that participation is very widespread, that it has a hugely positive, life-changing impact on people and communities and is central to many people’s lives. At the same time, it has its ‘darker’ side in that it can lead to stress, emotional problems and relationship breakdown. It will undoubtedly be important for Natural Connections to understand these dangers and to guard against them as much as possible by implementing good practice in volunteer support.

The risks associated with grassroots groups have been referred to earlier. Also, the *Pathways through Participation* study found evidence of difficulties caused by dominant or clashing personalities within groups, the development of cliques and disagreements about how to achieve the mission of an organisation. Moreover, differential access to resources and networks meant that opportunities to participate were not equally available to all, and that some people were effectively excluded from participation unless positive action was taken to address barriers.

Developing this theme, a ‘thinkpiece’ from IVR<sup>xvii</sup> suggests that there has been an overwhelming bias towards researching and presenting the benefits of volunteering without balancing this account by acknowledging negative effects upon individuals and communities. Natural Connections should recognise that there is potential for those volunteers involved in the programme to have negative as well as positive experiences and should act accordingly.

## 2.5 Innovative approaches to community engagement through volunteering

New options for volunteering have begun to emerge alongside the structured volunteering programmes provided by established organisations and the long-term commitment required by grassroots community groups. These innovative forms of community engagement offer people a flexible range of opportunities that can be fitted to their lives and interests. Three examples are:

### 2.5.1 The National Trust's Family Volunteering Scheme

Launched as a pilot in 2010, with backing from the Big Lottery Fund, its principal aims were to:

- Engage local families who may not normally visit their local (National Trust) property and enable them to get involved as volunteers, building their connection to properties;
- Offer a broader, more accessible range of volunteering opportunities fitting families' lifestyles; and
- Help build staff and volunteer confidence in working with families.

Over the year of its operation, the pilot scheme ran at 17 properties, involving 63 families in activities such as conservation clearance work; gardening, surveying and planting; demonstrations; hosting; and advisory activities. The evaluation<sup>xviii</sup> found that the scheme challenged perceptions of volunteering and brought properties more closely in touch with local communities. It offered families opportunities to spend time together, enjoying new experiences and achievements. There were also benefits to staff through the skills they gained in working with families. The National Trust is keen to share its learning from this scheme with other organisations, and a version of the family volunteering model may be something that Natural Connections would wish to explore, again building on the links between people's volunteering choices and the life stage they are at (e.g. having school-age children).

### 2.5.2 The Do Some Good app

Created by Orange in partnership with numerous voluntary sector organisations, including IVR. By means of an app available for android phones, users are offered micro-volunteering opportunities whereby they can commit themselves to five-minute actions in a good cause. A recent project with an environmental focus is My Urban Oasis through which people have been using their mobile phones to send images to Groundwork of their favourite green urban spaces. The result is a new interactive map that shares information about 'hidden green gems' across the country. Natural Connections may wish to consider ways of offering similar micro-volunteering opportunities to people who are keen to help but lack time.

### 2.5.3 Incredible Edible Todmorden

From the outset, activists and enthusiasts have sparked new schemes and ideas for growing and enjoying food around the town, encouraging local people to join in and contribute. There are opportunities for everyone – *'If your fingers aren't green, we still need you'*. The result has been an explosion of energy and creativity around local food production that has generated its own movement. Aspects of the initiative that appear particularly pertinent to Natural Connections are its inclusiveness, its capacity to enter into partnership with sympathetic organisations without losing its authenticity, and its organisation into distinctive

hubs of activity, thus giving shape to the initiative and easy points of connection for people wishing to join in.

## 2.6 Implications for Natural Connections

It is recommended that Natural England should:

- Develop a robust and structured volunteering programme that draws on good practice in the recruitment, support and training of volunteers.
- Avoid unnecessary over-formalisation of processes and structures which could act to exclude some people.
- Ensure that links are built with small, volunteer-led and grassroots groups which involve local people. Links should be developed with existing community networks and community anchor organisations in order to identify these groups, many of which exist 'below the radar'.
- Connect with local information hubs or networks (e.g. Volunteer Centres, CVSs, community centres) to keep people abreast of developments within Natural Connections and inform them about volunteer roles.

# 3. Evidence about involving volunteers in learning and support roles

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## 3.1 Volunteering within teaching and learning

Volunteers are widely involved in supporting teaching and learning in schools. Helping Out <sup>xix</sup>, a national survey of volunteering and charitable giving, reported in 2007 that 31 per cent of volunteers were involved in education. While this represents a considerable volunteer workforce, little research exists to pin down the factors that contribute to successful involvement. Evidence of success tends to be presented mainly in terms of outcomes for students.

The evidence in this section is drawn not from a research overview but empirically from five separate initiatives that provide practical examples of involving volunteers in teaching and learning support roles. In each case, the model has either been subject to extensive review by the scheme provider or to external evaluation. Although these are selective examples, we believe that it is possible to draw some useful indicators about what works for volunteers and for schools from the evidence presented.

## 3.2 STEM Ambassadors

STEM Ambassadors is a scheme organised by STEMNET (Science, Technology, Mathematics and Engineering Network). STEM Ambassadors are people who work professionally or study within the STEM domains and who volunteer in school settings, sharing their specialist knowledge and expertise with teachers and young people. There are currently more than 24,000 Ambassadors covering an enormous range of subject specialisms. Their role is to help teachers enhance and enrich the STEM curriculum in these by providing innovative activities in the classroom and outdoors, and also through complementary roles such as mentoring, giving talks and running science clubs. The programme is free to schools.

The volunteers' involvement in schools is supported in the following ways, each of which the scheme's organisers see as being integral to the model and to creating successful outcomes:

- A national induction package with key messages that must be communicated to volunteers about working with young people and schools. The package is delivered locally and may be tailored to local circumstances, for example by mentioning successful projects in the area;
- Proactive links with schools to make sure they are aware of the programme;
- Locally provided support if needed: to schools in framing their requests; to volunteers and schools in order to create successful matches; and to volunteers in developing activities. Booster training is also delivered locally;
- An emphasis on short-term and one-off commitments (often no more than a day) to fit in with volunteers' busy work schedules. However, the model is flexible and some volunteers will stay involved for longer;
- Feedback from schools after each volunteer visit; and

- Regular communication with Ambassadors and built-in processes for giving recognition and reward, for example through the national STEMNET Awards scheme.

### 3.3 English Heritage Education Volunteers

As part of its national strategy to improve opportunities for education and learning at its sites, English Heritage introduced a new Education Volunteering Programme in 2006. Education Volunteers were introduced at selected sites to support, develop or lead a new programme of interactive Discovery Visits for schools. These comprised a range of activities, such as historical re-enactments, creative workshops, role plays, tours and trails. Although not classroom-based and working with adult volunteers, they provided support for complementary learning on historical and heritage topics. Before this new initiative the main offer to schools consisted of free educational visits led by teachers themselves, with the sole support of a teacher's pack supplied by English Heritage.

A detailed evaluation of the scheme was conducted by IVR<sup>xx</sup> and a summary document is available at [www.ivr.org.uk](http://www.ivr.org.uk). Factors that were found to have contributed to the successful involvement of volunteers, many of which are transferable to Natural Connections, included:

- Communication and consultation with local staff before introducing volunteers;
- Consistent personal support from the National Volunteers Manager and partnership between her and local managers and staff;
- A systematic advertising and recruitment procedure for volunteers, including a friendly informal interview. Site staff and managers were involved in the process;
- Careful preparation of volunteer roles and accurate presentation of these roles to prospective volunteers;
- Fulfilment of volunteers' personal goals, which typically had both a social aspect (such as working in a team, working with children) and an intellectual element (such as deepening their knowledge of local history); and
- Offering volunteers a challenging commitment, along with enough support to meet the challenge.

### 3.4 Active Citizens in School Programme (ACiS)

Although focused on volunteering by school students themselves rather than by supportive adults, ACiS produced several lessons about success factors in school-based volunteering that have a more general relevance. ACiS was a three year pilot programme launched in 2001 by the Department for Education and Skills and delivered by two charities. It extended the Millennium Volunteers model to a younger age group. More than 5,000 young people aged 11-15 years were engaged in volunteering over the course of the pilot. While not all volunteering took place in schools, discrete school-based projects were an important strand and included involvement in learning support activities such as peer mentoring.<sup>xxi</sup>

The pilot was evaluated by IVR. It identified both strategic and school-level success factors. At a strategic level, these factors included:

- A model that combined a national strategic framework (providing quality assurance and recognition) with flexible local delivery. A regional framework supported networking and training among participating schools; and
- A national system of recognition through certificates for hours of volunteering achieved. One recommendation was that this could be linked to accreditation.

At school level, key factors were:

- The clear identification of a member of the school staff with overall responsibility for the volunteer programme, ideally with dedicated time for this role;
- Senior management team support;
- Commitment to the core principles of the programme; and
- Links to the citizenship curriculum.

### **3.5 School-based volunteering amongst City of London businesses**

Employer-supported volunteering (ESV) is an important resource for supporting teaching and learning in schools and also brings significant benefits to employees through the development of their skills. A recent report<sup>xxii</sup> commissioned by the City of London of education-based ESV schemes across 16 major businesses in the City focuses mainly upon the outcomes for the volunteers and employers in terms of new skills and competencies that subsequently enhanced their performance in the workplace. Although it does not draw out in detail the issues involved in setting up the schemes, it does provide useful indicators about those aspects of volunteering that are likely to prove particularly attractive to employers and employees in this sector.

The five most frequently offered volunteering programmes were:

1. Reading/number/activity partnership programmes;
2. Individual student mentoring;
3. Providing enterprise workshops in schools;
4. Supporting an education-related charity; and
5. Working as a school governor.

Volunteers were drawn from all levels of the organisations, from the most recently recruited to the most senior. A particularly innovative aspect of the study was that it differentiated between the different types of volunteering in terms of the skills and competencies gained. For example, those involved in the partnership programmes in the classroom were found to have developed skills in two main areas: communication, and influencing and negotiating while those engaged in student mentoring demonstrated gains in four areas: adaptability and being effective in different surroundings; influencing and negotiation skills; decision making and exercising judgement; and developing skills and ability to help others improve.

The researchers also sought to discover what precisely it is about the volunteering experience that assists the development of skills and came up with four main factors in descending order of importance:

1. Being exposed to a new environment;
2. Having the opportunity to interact with a wider group of people;
3. Being required to take a leadership role; and
4. Developing empathy and understanding.

For ESV to be sustainable over the longer term, it was vital that volunteers received feedback from schools about their activities and knew that their contribution has made a real difference.

These findings provide a useful steer for Natural Connections in shaping and marketing volunteering opportunities within the scheme, particularly if it decides to go down the ESV

path. It is clear that volunteering needs to be credible to employers in terms of the opportunities it offers to acquire and improve skills that will enhance their employees' commitment and performance in their working lives.

### 3.6 Young Enterprise

Young Enterprise is a UK-wide business and education charity<sup>xxiii</sup> that each year involves around 5,000 volunteers from more than 3,500 companies in classroom-based learning about business and the world of work. Its guiding principle is 'learning by doing', and this is incorporated into the programmes designed for every stage from primary through to secondary and further education. It aims to complement the curriculum in giving young people the skills they need – such as teamwork, practical thinking and punctuality – that will improve their employability in the longer term.

Programmes for children at primary level begin with 'Ourselves' for the youngest, aged 4-7, followed by 'Our Families' (5-8), 'Our Community' (6-9), 'Our City' (7-10), 'Our Nation' (8-11) and 'Our World' (9-12). Each comprises activity-based learning facilitated by a Young Enterprise business volunteer and is designed to support the mainstream curriculum. There is a similar progression for older students, and those aged 15-19 may take part in the Company Programme, which gives them the opportunity to run their own real businesses for a year with support from business mentors.

Independent evaluation of the impact of Young Enterprise on the life and career prospects of young people who had taken part in its programmes has indicated a series of positive outcomes in terms of earnings, career progression and skills development. Young Enterprise alumni were also more likely to volunteer than their peers. Key factors in the successful implementation of the scheme appear to be:

- Carefully designed, age-appropriate learning packages that can be consistently delivered by business volunteers;
- Explicit links to the curriculum;
- A logical progression through the different programmes, so that children are given the sense of taking part in a journey; and
- An engaging, activity-based approach.

### 3.7 Implications for Natural Connections

It is recommended that Natural England should provide volunteers with:

- A strong, clear support structure, but one which allows for challenge and development;
- Opportunities which allow for choice and flexibility, including a variety of longer-term activities alongside one-off or occasional offers;
- An opportunity which matches their needs, aspirations and motivations as closely as possible in terms of their personal and professional development; and
- Feedback on their involvement and the difference they are making.

In addition, it is recommended that Natural England should:

- Explicitly connect programmes for complementary learning to the requirements of the curriculum at each stage;

- Secure the commitment of senior management within the school and identify a lead member of staff for liaison and communication with Natural England; and
- Share learning across schools about 'what works' in the involvement of volunteers.



## 4. Evidence about effective volunteer recruitment and training

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This section brings together several strands of national research that describe patterns of volunteer recruitment and training, and some of the associated challenges. Volunteer recruitment is first considered from the viewpoint of volunteers themselves, with particular regard to their motivations to volunteer and the routes they take into volunteering. This is complemented by evidence from volunteer-involving organisations about their quest to find and retain volunteers. General patterns of volunteer training are then discussed, once again drawing upon the experience of both volunteers and organisations, and including the constraints on provision. Finally, some implications for Natural Connections are drawn from the evidence.

### 4.1 Volunteer Motivations

The 2007 Helping Out survey<sup>xxiv</sup> showed high levels of involvement in formal volunteering (i.e. volunteering through a group, club or organisation), with almost three-fifths (59 per cent) having volunteered within the past year and two-fifths (39 per cent) having done so on a regular basis (at least once a month). Most had helped more than one organisation, and a sizeable minority helped three or more. As noted earlier, the most common field of interest of the organisations they helped was education (31 per cent), and 25 per cent of volunteers were directly involved in educational activity (i.e. activity in educational settings, including direct learning support but also comprising other aspects, such as governance). This evidence of a substantial, committed volunteer force with a strong presence in education is a strong foundation on which Natural Connections can build.

Understanding why people volunteer provides a sound basis for recruitment. The Helping Out survey found that the leading motive for all volunteers was wanting to improve things/help people (53 per cent), followed by believing in a cause and having time to spare (both 41 per cent). A desire to meet people and make friends (30 per cent), doing something connected to the interests and needs of families and friends (29 per cent) and meeting a need in the community (29 per cent) were other significant motives. These global figures did, however, conceal important differences between different demographic groups, something that Natural Connections may wish to take account of in its own recruitment processes. For example, young people aged 16-24 were the age group most likely to say that they volunteered in order to advance their careers or to gain a new skill. Volunteers should, wherever possible, be placed in opportunities that match the individual's original motivations for taking part.

Similarly, students responding to an online survey as part of a 2010 study of student volunteering undertaken by IVR<sup>xxv</sup>, expressed both altruistic and instrumental reasons for becoming volunteers. Like volunteers within the general population, they were strongly motivated by an altruistic desire to improve things and help people but personal development goals were also a high priority. These included improving their skills, adding to their CVs and gaining work experience, and enhancing the learning from their university course. The opportunity to meet people and make new friends was also attractive to a large majority.

Volunteer surveys can also be helpful in identifying the barriers to involvement. In common with other national surveys, the Helping Out survey found that lack of time was the main reason for not volunteering, cited by 8 out of 10 of those who had not formally volunteered in

the previous year but said they would like to help. Other significant reasons (mentioned by more than 40 per cent of non-volunteers) were being put off by bureaucracy and being worried by risk and liability.

## 4.2 Routes into volunteering

Given the amount of effort and debate that organisations devote to volunteer recruitment, the Helping Out survey provides a salutary reminder that by far the most significant route to volunteering is word-of-mouth introduction, with two thirds (66 per cent) of volunteers having become involved in this way, considerably ahead of the second and third most important pathways, which were having previously used the services of the organisation (20 per cent), and seeing an opportunity advertised on a leaflet or poster (15 per cent). Although evidently an effective mode of recruitment, word-of-mouth introduction is likely to have important limitations, such as restricting volunteering opportunities to an inner circle of volunteers and people known to them, and limiting the diversity of volunteer intake.

Only two per cent of volunteers had been recruited through Volunteer Centres (VCs). While this raises challenging questions about the effectiveness of VCs in grassroots recruitment, there is evidence (explored in the next section) that they are particularly effective at engaging with groups that are traditionally under-represented among volunteers. Working with VCs is therefore likely to be a productive way of increasing the diversity of volunteers.

Other modes of recruitment with a marginal impact were local newspapers (three per cent), national or local TV (two per cent), local radio (one per cent) and general volunteering websites (one per cent).

The IVR study of student volunteering found that they were more likely than the population at large to use formal structures. Although they followed multiple pathways into volunteering, making contact through university or student union was the single most frequently used route (38 per cent). Word-of-mouth recommendations by family and friends were almost as important (34 per cent) and many students had been introduced to volunteering through their school or sixth form college prior to arriving at university (25 per cent). A smaller number (15 per cent) discovered volunteering through direct contact with an organisation. Just seven per cent had been referred through a Volunteer Centre.

## 4.3. Recruitment from the perspective of volunteer-involving organisations

IVR's *Management Matters* survey in 2008<sup>xxvi</sup> was the first national survey of volunteer management capacity. It focused on the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) and the public sector, represented by the NHS. This was followed in 2010 by IVR's *Valuing Volunteers Management Skills* survey<sup>xxvii</sup>, which took a detailed look at the skills of volunteer managers and their development needs within the VCS. Both surveys offer insights into the challenges of recruitment and the extent to which good practice in the management of volunteers has become embedded in organisations.

Indications from the first survey were that most volunteer-involving organisations were experiencing some level of difficulty with three different aspects of volunteer recruitment: recruiting enough volunteers (59 per cent); recruiting volunteers with the skills they need (57 per cent); and recruiting volunteers from a wide range of social and community backgrounds (56 per cent). However, when organisations were differentiated by size, small organisations (with annual incomes below £10,000) fared considerably less well with all aspects of recruitment. For example, one in three small organisations reported 'a lot' of problems with recruitment, compared with one in seven of those with incomes over £1 million. It was

encouraging to find that most organisations reported little difficulty in retaining their volunteers once they had recruited them but, once again, small organisations were disproportionately likely to experience retention difficulties.

While the survey revealed an unmet demand for volunteers, with nearly three-quarters of respondents saying that their organisations wanted to recruit more, the actual number of additional volunteers required was quite modest (mostly fewer than ten), except in the largest organisations which claimed to be able to absorb more than 20 volunteers or, in some cases, as many volunteers as came forward.

The difficulties with recruitment and retention reported by small organisations were associated with structural and resource constraints in the management of volunteers. Small organisations were less likely to have funding for volunteer support, to have paid volunteer co-ordinators and managers or to implement recommended practices in the management of volunteers (such as having a written policy for their involvement and giving formal recognition of their contribution).

Many of these findings were echoed by the follow-on 2010 skills survey. In particular, most organisations experienced some level of difficulty in recruiting and retaining volunteers but this was especially pronounced for small organisations and those with unpaid volunteer managers. Although there was some encouraging evidence that recognised good practice in volunteer management had spread more widely across smaller organisations, managers were less likely than in larger organisations to look outside for good practice development and support. Indeed they tended to function in isolation from organisational networks and were less inclined than their counterparts in large organisations to perceive a need for professional development. Perhaps not surprisingly in this context, small organisations were also less likely to look to their local Volunteer Centre for support and advice.

The more specific survey of student volunteering found that while organisations greatly prized their student volunteers, they often expressed frustration at the difficulties of finding their way around the university system in order to connect with them. Like the students themselves, organisations often focused on the brokerage services offered by the student union; for example, they attended the recruitment fairs regularly organised by the student volunteering service. Although the rewards were variable in terms of the numbers of students recruited, the fairs were appreciated as a convenient vehicle for promoting their organisation and meeting students. Direct contacts with academic departments were sometimes productive, particularly if staff were supportive of volunteering and offered some kind of subject-related accreditation as an incentive to become involved.

## **4.4 Investing in volunteers through training**

Available evidence about the training offered to volunteers is often difficult to interpret. Volunteer-based surveys show that comparatively few are offered any form of training. For example, 79 per cent of volunteers in the Helping Out survey said that they had received no training at all for their volunteer role, 19 per cent had received training, and two per cent were already trained. These figures were virtually unchanged from those reported ten years earlier by the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering<sup>xxviii</sup>. Drilling deeper into these figures, however, Helping Out found that regular volunteers were more likely to receive training than those who got involved occasionally (25 per cent compared with 10 per cent). There were also differences according to the role performed by volunteers: for example, 36 per cent involved in educating received training compared with 16 per cent of those whose role was to raise or handle money. Volunteers were generally satisfied with the training they were offered.

When the question of volunteer training is examined from the perspective of volunteer-involving organisations, it becomes clear that this is an issue that is taken seriously by organisations even though provision is often patchy. The recent *Valuing Volunteers Management Skills* survey found that 59 per cent of organisations had a budget for volunteer training and 54 per cent had a training plan in place. At the same time, only 39 per cent always assessed whether volunteers had gaps in their skills. Informal in-house training was by far the most common form of training offered (by 71 per cent), followed by structured in-house training or learning programmes (48 per cent when not linked to a certificate or attendance award and 33 per cent with this link built in). External training, whether or not linked to a nationally recognised qualification, was offered by just 29 per cent.

When asked about reasons for not providing training for volunteers, lack of funding (44 per cent) and lack of volunteer time (42 per cent) were identified as the principal barriers. The belief that volunteers did not want to participate (33 per cent) and the lack of available training (31 per cent) were also important factors.

## 4.5 Implications for Natural Connections

It is recommended that Natural England should:

- Use a targeted word-of-mouth approach to recruitment (e.g. making personal contacts and issuing invitations to local people to come and find out about the project). Other approaches, such as leaflets and posters should also be used to maximise coverage and extend beyond people's personal networks;
- Build relationships with small, volunteer-led, grassroots organisations to help recruit volunteers from less formalised structures;
- Develop volunteering opportunities for whole families to participate in, building on parents / carers / extended families' connections with local schools; and
- Invest suitable levels of resource in volunteer management and training in order that good practice principles are adhered to.

# 5. A summary of volunteering brokerage services in England

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## 5.1 Volunteer brokerage

Brokerage is the process of matching individuals with suitable volunteering opportunities. It needs skill in helping potential volunteers explore their interests and needs, and it also demands an excellent knowledge of the opportunities on offer.

Any volunteer-involving organisation should be involved in brokering opportunities within its own sphere so that new volunteers will be directed to those parts of the organisation where their skills will be used to best effect. There are also bodies that broker volunteering across different organisations, helping people to find the opportunities and settings that are right for them.

This section is descriptive rather than evaluative in that it seeks to set out what currently exists, relying mainly on the self-reported information from brokerage schemes. With the exception of Volunteer Centres and student brokerage services, few brokerage schemes have been subject to independent analysis of their effectiveness in supporting volunteer recruitment. The different schemes are nonetheless a potentially useful resource for the Natural Connections Demonstration Project, enabling it to connect with different pools of volunteers across the country.

## 5.2 Volunteer centres

Of the approximately 300 Volunteer Centres (VCs) in England, 261 are members of Volunteering England (VE). Baseline data from member VCs is collected by the Annual Return for Volunteer Centres. Findings from the 2009/2010 return are the basis for the information presented here<sup>xxix</sup>.

Around one third of VCs are independent organisations, the remaining two thirds being integrated with other organisations, mainly local Councils for Voluntary Service. VCs are committed to performing six core functions:

- Brokerage;
- Marketing volunteering;
- Good practice development;
- Development of volunteering opportunities;
- Policy response and campaigning; and
- Strategic development of volunteering.

Providing a generic brokerage service for their communities is their primary role. The mean level of volunteer enquiries for 2009/10 was 1,574, of which 315 were converted into volunteer placements. This represents a 24 per cent conversion rate, although it is difficult to generate a reliable figure because of difference in recording placements and enquiries.

Relying upon average figures to give a picture of VCs is in any case likely to be misleading because of the variability in their size, scope and resources. They do not provide a consistent geographical coverage, with gaps in some areas and a comprehensive service in others. Most (88 per cent) receive local authority funding and ten per cent are totally reliant

on this source, but levels of support vary considerably, from a few thousand pounds to several hundred thousand.

Current spending constraints are likely to bear heavily upon VCs, particularly since levels of demand for their services are already exceeding their capacity. Responses to the 2009/10 return showed that 88 per cent of VCs rated demand for their brokerage service as 'high' while only 52 per cent felt that their capacity to respond was 'high': a shortfall of 36 per cent. A recent paper from IVR notes that 'when the network is taken as a whole the picture painted by the existing literature is one of perpetual flux and under-resourcing.'<sup>xxx</sup>

There is contradictory evidence of the effectiveness of VCs as a conduit for volunteer recruitment. While the Helping Out survey, discussed in section 4 of this report, suggests that comparatively few people find their way into volunteering through the VC route, a well-documented strength of the VC network is its capacity to engage groups that are traditionally under-represented in the general volunteering population, notably people aged 16-34, people not in work, and those from minority ethnic groups. Many VCs have proactively set up supported volunteering programmes to target these groups.

Figures from the latest Annual Return show that 29 per cent of enquiries came from 19-25 year olds and 63 per cent from 15-34 year olds, contrasting sharply with general levels of volunteering in the Citizenship Survey for 2009/10, which show that 16-34 year olds are less likely to engage in formal volunteering than any other adult age group.<sup>xxxi</sup> Twenty-six per cent of enquiries came from people in employment, compared with 50 per cent from those who were not employed or unable to work (at a time when the national adult employment rate was 70 per cent). The proportion of enquiries to VCs from Black, Asian and other ethnic minority groups is also consistently higher from year to year than for the population as a whole.

### 5.3 Online brokerage

Do-it and Timebank are both generic national brokerage schemes that use web technology to match volunteers to local opportunities. Do-it is run by YouthNet and is an online national volunteering database that lists more than one million volunteering opportunities. Volunteers can apply online for opportunities in their area and their details are then forwarded to the organisation providing the opportunity or to a Volunteer Centre.

Timebank is a national campaign to raise awareness of the value of volunteering and to match volunteers to opportunities on behalf of other organisations and within its own programmes and projects. The latter include mentoring, youth-led volunteering and employee volunteering. Volunteers are once again able to apply on line and will be signposted towards opportunities near to where they live.

### 5.4 Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV) Brokerage Schemes

Brokerage schemes play an important role in employer supported volunteering (ESV). The involvement of employees in organised volunteering brings significant benefit to companies, communities and individuals. Volunteering can be tailored to the interests, expertise and availability of employees and may involve anything from one-off team challenges to long-term individual commitments. While some employees bring professional skills to bear, for example through mentoring or pro bono work for voluntary groups, others engage in generic activities such as fundraising and practical projects.

Brokerage schemes exist to negotiate and arrange volunteering opportunities for ESV. Brokers include both charitable organisations and private consultancies.<sup>xxxii</sup> Some are



geared primarily to working with individual employers to create bespoke volunteering opportunities, while others work with networks of business organisations. The examples given here are a small selection from a large number of active schemes. They have been chosen to illustrate the options that exist for Natural Connections to engage with ESV nationally, regionally and locally.

Prominent among national ESV brokerage schemes are those run by Business in the Community (BiTC) as part of its mission to work with companies to define and promote responsible business practice. One scheme is Cares, a network of more than 350 partner organisations operating in 35 locations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Cares partners encourage their employees to volunteer within business hours to address social issues within their communities. It provides a network of experienced employee volunteering advisors and sets up appropriate volunteering opportunities in consultation with all stakeholders. BiTC also runs Pro Help, a national network of more than 400 business which offer free expert advice and support to local communities through 26 local Pro Help groups across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

A good example of a brokerage scheme covering a particular geographical area is that run by Exeter CVS through its Time and Talents Programme. The scheme works with corporate members of the CVS to set up ESV partnerships so that the skills and interests of employees can be matched with community needs. Companies are also helped to develop their ESV policies and procedures, including best practice guidelines. Another local scheme is City Action run by the City of London Corporation. City Action offers a free matchmaking service to city-based businesses so that their employees can share their skills through volunteering with community organisations in the City and the seven surrounding boroughs.

## **5.5 Individual brokerage for skilled business people**

REACH provides a national brokerage service for individuals who would like to use their business skills for the benefit of charitable organisations. Volunteers offer a wide range of skills, including IT, accountancy, HR, project management and marketing. They include retired people and those currently not in work as well as those in employment. While the focus is similar to that of many ESV schemes, REACH offers a personalised service to individuals rather than a partnership with employers.

## **5.6 Brokerage for retired people**

RSVP, the Retired and Senior Volunteers Programme, sits within Community Service Volunteers. It covers England, Scotland and Wales and its mission is to encourage people aged 50 plus to volunteer in their local areas. Volunteers can become involved in a host of projects that span many different areas of interest. Education is an important focus for RSVP and offers many different opportunities for more than 4,000 volunteers to supporting learning and school-based activities. Volunteers are variously engaged in paired/group reading, library support, numeracy work, art and craft sessions, music, sports and games, storytelling, teaching computer skills, gardening projects and the setting up of out-of-school and after-school clubs.

## **5.7 Sector-specific brokerage**

These are schemes that broker links between local groups and people working in defined sectors, such as the media, law and IT, who wish to volunteer their expertise for community benefit. STEM Ambassadors, discussed in section three, is an example of such a scheme. Another is the Media Trust that links media organisations and charities. Volunteers may become involved in providing one-to-one support to charities, supporting young people as

mentors or sharing their expertise in other ways. Similarly, IT4Communities matches IT professionals with voluntary and community groups that need their expertise and provides comprehensive support for volunteering projects

## 5.8 Student brokerage schemes

A study conducted by IVR of student volunteering at six universities<sup>xxxiii</sup>, discussed more fully in the next section, showed that student brokerage schemes run by student unions are highly valued by students and volunteer-involving organisations alike. Although by no means the only route into student volunteering, they provide a convenient and visible point of connection. Volunteering opportunities are promoted to students by means of email bulletins, postings on websites or opportunity boards, posters and flyers. Volunteering fairs or stalls at freshers' fairs are another widely used method through which volunteer-involving organisations can display and explain their work. Volunteer co-ordinators within the student volunteering services offer a more personalised brokerage service, liaising between student volunteers and the community.

## 5.9 Implications for Natural Connections

It is recommended that Natural England should:

- Produce an area-by-area map of active brokerage schemes and contacts in the areas served by Natural Connections, in recognition that national coverage and range of brokerage can be variable;
- Connect with existing brokerage services (e.g. Volunteer Centres, CVSs, student brokerage within universities, Do-it, Timebank) and build on their embedded networks and connections within the community; and
- Develop links with local companies to explore options for employer-supported volunteering schemes as a particular approach to bringing in specific skills.



# 6. Measuring good practice in the involvement of volunteers

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## 6.1 Good practice standards in volunteer involvement

The purpose of this section is to provide Natural Connections with some practical options for ensuring that standards of good practice in volunteer involvement are recognised, adopted and tested during the Demonstration Project.

It begins by considering the elements of good practice that should be in place in a well-designed formal volunteering scheme. This draws upon work undertaken by Volunteering England as part of the government-funded Volunteer Management Programme from 2009-11, and research linked to that programme by IVR. It goes on to consider frameworks and toolkits through which organisations can examine their practice and work towards nationally agreed standards. The option of external evaluation is then examined. Finally, implications for Natural Connections are drawn out.

## 6.2 What does good practice look like?

Understanding and promoting good practice in volunteer involvement has always been a core area of work for Volunteering England (VE), and this has been reflected in the research programme of IVR. The past ten years has seen an emerging consensus about standards for managing and involving volunteers. This partly reflects the extent to which the *Investing in Volunteers* quality standard (discussed below) for volunteer-involving organisations has become embedded but it is also the result of specific initiatives to improve standards, notably the recently completed Volunteer Management Programme. VE delivered two major projects as part of the programme: the *Value Volunteering Management Campaign*<sup>xxxiv</sup> and the *Volunteer Management Portal*<sup>xxxv</sup>, and IVR has conducted major surveys to support the valuing volunteer management agenda, as noted in Section 4.3.

General agreement about what constitutes good practice in working with volunteers provides a benchmark for examining current performance standards and trends<sup>xxxvi</sup>. For example, the *Management Matters* survey conducted by IVR in 2008 and the its *Valuing Volunteer Management Skills* survey in 2010 use a similar set of good practice measures in order to generate a performance profile of organisations, and the two surveys together provide some indication of trends (although these must be treated with caution since the two surveys are not entirely comparable).

**Table 1: The occurrence of good practice measures**

Good practice measure	per cent VCS organisations* achieving in 2008	per cent VCS organisations achieving in 2010
Identified person(s) providing or persons whom volunteers could go to for support	90	100**
Interview or informal chat with volunteers before they start	83	87
Volunteer induction	Not asked	80
Equal opportunities monitoring of volunteers	79	Not asked
Means of recognising and rewarding volunteers	78	Not asked
Training arranged for volunteers	77	71
Written policy on volunteer involvement	75	71
Evaluation of the impact of volunteers	58	Not asked
Written task descriptions for volunteer roles	51	58
One-to-one supervision sessions for volunteers	45	60
Group supervision sessions for volunteers	28	57
Exit interviews with volunteers	26	54

\*These figures exclude those for NHS organisations covered in this survey.

\*\*This survey was based on responses from volunteer managers, hence the 100 per cent figure.

Good practice principles are often geared towards larger, more formalised organisations and can be less relevant to smaller organisations based upon informal structures and agreements. The breakdown does nonetheless offer an interesting picture of the relative strengths and weaknesses in the good practice profile of volunteer-involving organisations. Relatively poorly developed areas in 2008 were evaluation, regular supervision, provision of written task descriptions and exit interviews with volunteers. A comparable figure for evaluation is not available in 2010 but there are indications of significant improvement in the remaining three areas. More detailed analysis showed that these improvements were particularly marked in smaller organisations. A less positive finding is the apparent decline in the provision of training and written policies for volunteer involvement.

## 6.3 Frameworks and toolkits for assessing volunteering standards

Several frameworks have been developed to help VCS organisations measure the quality of what they deliver and the effectiveness of their procedures and policies. Notable examples are PQASSO<sup>xxxvii</sup> and SROI (Social Return on Investment)<sup>xxxviii</sup>. The former is a well-established quality standard for third sector organisations built upon 12 topics or 'quality areas'. It can be used as a self-assessment tool or as the basis of an external assessment. The goal is to promote an organisation-wide improvement in quality. SROI focuses instead upon the value of the social, economic and environmental outcomes of an activity or organisation.

Since our concern is specifically with the volunteering component of the Demonstration Project, we confine ourselves here to a detailed examination of frameworks that are

volunteer-specific. *Investing in Volunteers* is a quality standard that is subject to external assessment while the *Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit* is a flexible, self-administered evaluation package. Additionally, the *Volunteering Investment and Value Audit* enables organisations to ascribe a financial value to the contribution of their volunteers.

### 6.3.1 Investing in Volunteers

Investing in Volunteers is the UK quality standard for volunteer management. It was originally conceived as a response to the drive for quality that originated in the private sector, extended to the public sector in the 1990s and was then increasingly taken up by the VCS as a means of reviewing and improving standards, often with the explicit encouragement of funders. Existing quality frameworks did not always fit easily<sup>xxxix</sup> with the scale and objectives of VCS organisations, and Investing in Volunteers was designed by a local infrastructure body to meet their specific needs and aspirations. After a successful pilot in six London boroughs, it was rolled out across the UK and is now managed in England by Volunteering England (VE).

The quality standard has ten indicators<sup>xl</sup>, which express the commitments or aspirations of the organisation about a particular aspect of volunteer involvement, such as diversity, safeguarding, fair recruitment, and appropriate roles for volunteers. These provide a valuable reference point for any organisation, including Natural Connections, wishing to put in place standards of good practice in working with volunteers. Next to each indicator is a set of practices that provide the criteria against which assessors can rate the performance of the organisation and judge whether the standard has been met. For example, the indicator for volunteer roles is that, *'The organisation develops appropriate roles for volunteers in line with its aims and objectives, which are of value to the volunteers.'* The practice points relating to this indicator are:

- 'A description is drawn up for each volunteer role;
- The organisation sets out the necessary skills, attitude, experience and availability needed to carry out the role;
- If feasible, a variety of tasks is made available, which will attract a range of people, while still meeting the needs and aims of the organisation; and
- Where possible, tasks are adapted to meet the needs, abilities and interests of individual volunteers.'

In order to meet the standard, organisations must go through an external assessment process to demonstrate that they have met the practice criteria. More than 470 organisations have achieved the accreditation across the UK, ranging from small community groups to large national charities.

### 6.3.2 The Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit (VIAT)

VIAT is an inexpensive, flexible, ready-made resource that volunteer-involving organisations can use for themselves to assess the impact of volunteering upon key groups of stakeholders: the volunteers, the organisation itself (as perceived by staff and managers), users and beneficiaries, and the community it serves. The toolkit is divided into modules for each of these groups, with a set of research tools for each one and step-by-step instructions for carrying out an assessment.

IVR has undertaken a number of detailed studies of how organisations have used VIAT. One example was a hospice with a large number of volunteers. which used VIAT to describe and measure the impact of volunteering upon volunteers themselves, staff and patients over two years. The research merged the core and supplementary questionnaires from the

toolkits for volunteers and staff, and a separate questionnaire was created for patients. This resulted in a large volume of both quantitative and qualitative information. In contrast, an environmental group needed to complete an assessment within a five-month period and decided to simplify the process by sending just the core questionnaires by email to volunteers, staff and user groups. Another example was a women's support group that decided to look at the experience of staff in the first phase and then focused upon volunteers the following year.

Case studies undertaken as part of a review of VIAT have provided useful feed-back about the benefits of using the toolkit:

- Highlighting aspects of the volunteering contribution that can often remain hidden, such as increasing the resources of the organisation through being involved in fundraising;
- Making funders and external bodies more aware of the value of volunteers and the support the organisation gives them;
- Showing volunteers how much they are appreciated by staff;
- Giving an insight into people's motivation for volunteers; and
- Helping to improve induction and training for volunteers, and for staff working with volunteers.

### **6.3.3 The Volunteer Investment and Value Audit (VIVA)<sup>xli</sup>**

VIVA is a tool for quantifying the financial value of volunteering within an organisation as one measure of the difference that volunteering makes. It has been widely used by volunteer-involving organisations in the public and private sectors and in the VCS since its introduction in 1996.

VIVA has a simple methodology and is designed to be self-administered. First, costs associated with volunteer involvement are listed. These may include such items as the salary of a dedicated volunteer manager, the costs of advertising and recruiting volunteers, induction and training, and volunteers' expenses. The second stage is to analyse what volunteers do and for how much time, match it to equivalent paid work and apply the market wage, thus generating a notional bill for volunteer services. Employment overheads and 'added value' (such as the amount of money raised through volunteer fundraising) can also be factored in.

The VIVA ratio is the total volunteer value divided by the total volunteer investment, giving a simple measure of the financial return for every £1 spent on volunteering. As well as generating headline financial figures, VIVA can contribute towards a more sophisticated understanding of the multiplicity of volunteer roles within an organisation and the total impact of volunteers' contribution.

## **6.4 External evaluation**

Comprehensive, user-friendly tools now offer organisations support in planning, monitoring and assessing good practice improvements in all aspects of volunteer involvement. These are part of a continuous evaluation process that is integral to a learning organisation.

Independent external evaluation is another option available to organisations. It is typically used when:

- An innovative and untested scheme involving volunteers is being run (e.g. the English Heritage Education Volunteers programme);
- A new kind of volunteering role is being tried out and the organisation needs to know whether this is a viable option for the future;
- A scheme is part of a broader programme involving several organisations. One of the functions of an external evaluation is to develop an overview of the programme as a whole and to compare and contrast constituent schemes; and
- It is required by external funders as a condition of funding.

In each case, evaluation may be formative or summative. A formative evaluation is undertaken alongside a scheme or programme as it unfolds and its findings can be used to influence the future shape of the programme. The more usual model is a summative evaluation that examines the initiative towards its conclusion or after it has ended, incorporating conclusions as to its effectiveness and making recommendations for the future.

An evaluation will usually seek to illuminate both the processes underpinning a scheme and its impact or outcome. For a volunteering scheme, this will include aspects such as volunteer recruitment, management and role-definition as well its effectiveness in achieving its goals.

The precise methods used in an external evaluation will vary according to the subject matter, the resources available, the experience and preferences of the researchers and the requirements of the commissioning organisations. Generally there will be a mix of complementary approaches in order to achieve both scale and depth in the investigation and analysis. For example, an online questionnaire for all participating volunteers might be used in conjunction with in-depth interviews with a small number of volunteers and/or case studies of their volunteering activity in order to describe their role and its context more fully.

## 6.5 Some guiding principles for evaluation

If Natural Connections is considering a formal evaluation of the scheme, a useful reference point is the set of good practice guidelines drawn up by the United Kingdom Evaluation Society (UKES). These are applied to the roles of evaluators, commissioners and participants in the evaluation process, and also cover self-evaluation<sup>xiii</sup>.

Looking more specifically at the evaluation of the volunteering element of the scheme, we offer the following good practice points based upon our own experience:

- The purpose and content of the evaluation should be explained to all the parties involved;
- Their consent should be obtained, either verbally or in writing;
- Individuals should not be pressurised to take part or to explore sensitive topics;
- The voices of volunteers must be heard as well as those of staff, managers, users/participants and community residents<sup>xiii</sup>;
- Volunteers' views should be sought separately from those of staff and other stakeholders;
- Individuals should not be identified in reported findings;
- The safe storage of personal information should be guaranteed, in accordance with the 1998 Data Protection Act;

- The costs of taking part in the evaluation (such as travelling costs to focus groups) should be covered for non-staff participants, including volunteers;
- Incentives should be considered as a means of boosting interest and response rates (for example, an offer of entry into a prize draw for a book token after completion of an online volunteers' survey); and
- The research findings should be communicated to all who have taken part, including volunteers.

## 6.6 Implications for Natural Connections

It is recommended that Natural England should:

- Explore options to apply the Investing in Volunteer standard as a reference point for designing the volunteer programme;
- Utilise the knowledge, experience and policies of national and local volunteering infrastructure (e.g. Volunteering England and the Volunteer Centre network) when developing structures and policies for volunteering; and
- Commit itself to a regular assessment of the effectiveness and impact of Natural Connections, utilising existing tools and frameworks.

# 7. Conclusions

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## 7.1 Build on existing programmes and policies

Current government policy creates a number of opportunities for exciting and potentially valuable partnerships between Natural Connections and programmes such as the National Citizen Service pilots and the Community Organisers programme. There is much in common between the objectives of each and links should be proactively explored from an early stage.

## 7.2 Develop a robust and comprehensive volunteering programme

There is much good practice to draw upon for volunteer recruitment, support and management. The resultant model should include supervision, opportunities for feedback and reflection, and information about the outcomes and impact of the volunteers' work. Appropriate levels of resource should be provided, recognising the mantra that volunteering is 'freely given but not cost free'.

While strong structures should be developed to ensure a good volunteer experience, attempts should be made to avoid unnecessary over-formalisation which could deter some volunteers. In particular, links should be sought with smaller, volunteer-led and grassroots organisations reflecting the desire of Natural Connections to develop informal opportunities for participation.

## 7.3 Promote flexible and varied volunteering opportunities

Opportunities should reflect the individual motivations and aspirations of volunteers. Furthermore, flexibility should be promoted to allow people to take part in balance with their life stage and other external factors that could affect their ability to take part. A wide variety of opportunities should be provided to allow for choice, including more innovative and creative practices such as family volunteering.

## 7.4 Develop strong and meaningful relationships with schools

Attempts to build an effective working relationship with schools should be prioritised from the start; in particular senior management support should be sought and a named individual should act as the main point of contact between Natural England and the school.

## 7.5 Connect to existing infrastructure

Natural Connections should capitalise on the embedded and establish links of existing volunteering infrastructure, particularly Volunteer Centres. These networks and local hubs should be utilised as a route in to the local community, aiding recruitment of volunteers in particular. Volunteering infrastructure should, however, be regarded broadly, and connections should be made to student brokerage services as well as companies and their employer supported volunteering programmes.

## 7.6 Commit to programme evaluation

Regular and comprehensive evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of the Natural Connections project should be built in. In particular, efforts to ensure that the voices of the volunteers are heard should be encouraged.



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