Case study: Co-designing employee volunteering – Sky and Historic Environment Scotland

Context

Whilst ESV is a growing trend in Scotland, traditional one-off volunteering days can offer limited long-term benefits if not designed to meet employer, volunteer-involving organisation and employee needs.

As part of its work to develop a national framework for employer-supported volunteering (ESV), **Volunteer Scotland** trialled a co-design process for ESV team volunteering days. These participation partnerships, facilitated by **Make Your Mark,** aimed to create a team ESV day that was mutually beneficial for all stakeholders.

One of the participation partnerships saw Sky and Historic Environment Scotland work together to co-design a team ESV day in Holyrood Park.

Partner profiles

Employer: Sky

Sector: Telecommunications
Number of employees: >30,000

Sky is one of Europe's leading media and telecommunications companies, providing entertainment, broadband and connectivity across six countries.

For charity partners, Sky offers more than support. Through programmes like Time to Care, Sky volunteers bring energy, skills and a proactive, "above and beyond" approach that helps charities reach more people and create meaningful community impact.

Sky embeds employer-supported volunteering as a core part of their workplace culture and people engagement plans, and Sky works collaboratively year-round with local charity partners across Scotland. Sky focuses on building meaningful relationships that allows them to understand charity partners' needs and respond in a way that optimises both organisations' impact.

Volunteer-involving organisation: Historic Environment Scotland

Sector: Heritage
Number of employees: >1,000

Historic Environment Scotland is the lead public body established to investigate, care for and promote Scotland's historic environment, with over 300 properties in care across Scotland.

Holyrood Park, the site of the team ESV day, is recognised nationwide for the importance of its natural heritage value. It contains important geological features that have played a key role in shaping the modern understanding of geology. The park offers a unique outdoor experience, with a strong sense of wilderness enhanced by its high conservation value. A team of Conservation Volunteers does tasks within the park and collaborates with a wide range of volunteer groups throughout the year.

The co-design process

The ESV participation partnership had three key stages, supported by Make Your Mark as facilitator:

1. **Partnership building**: Initial meetings enabled partners to highlight motivations, expectations and practical constraints.
2. **Co-design workshop with employees**: A facilitated workshop invited Sky employees to generate ideas for volunteering activities and explore practical considerations.
3. **Reflection and joint planning:** Workshop outputs were reviewed by Sky, Historic Environment Scotland and Make Your Mark to develop a practical plan for the volunteering day.

The team volunteering day

On 19 February 2025, Sky employees volunteered alongside Historic Environment Scotland rangers at Holyrood Park. All activities began with a tool and safety briefing, where volunteers were provided with necessary equipment and protective gear.

Participants had the option to try out a range of hands-on conservation tasks, including:

- **Gorse management**: Volunteers used loppers and bow saws to cut back gorse growing on a hillside, helping to support biodiversity and manage wildfire risk.
- **Litter picking:** Volunteers collected litter from across the park using litter pickers, helping to protect wildlife and maintain the landscape for visitors.
- **Sapling management:** Volunteers cut back small tree saplings using loppers and bow saws to help maintain the landscape and enhance biodiversity.

Impact

For employee volunteers

Participants described the experience as rewarding and energising, with 100% of respondents to the feedback form indicating that the day supported them to develop skills, boosted their wellbeing and improved their connections with colleagues. They also said:

- “Being up in the hills on such a beautiful day… getting stuck into some hard graft felt amazing.”
- “Working alongside people from different teams was a lot of fun and a great chance to connect with new colleagues.”
- “Visitors stopping to thank us for helping to clean the area was a lovely boost.”
- “At the end of each session it was amazing to see the difference created in such a short space of time.”
- “Seeing those early ideas turn into real action gave a real sense of ownership and achievement.”

For Sky

The volunteering day provided employees with an opportunity to step away from their usual work environment and spend time outdoors while contributing to a meaningful cause. It also created space for cross-team collaboration, allowing colleagues from different parts of the organisation to connect in an informal setting.

For Historic Environment Scotland

The volunteering day delivered practical environmental benefits at Holyrood Park, including litter removal and gorse management. It also introduced new people to the site and provided an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of outdoor activity. The volunteer experience raised awareness of conservation work and led to positive interactions with members of the public who thanked volunteers for their efforts.

Key learning

The process has highlighted several key takeaways and areas for development:

- **Co-design increases engagement**: involving employees early in the planning process created a sense of ownership and enthusiasm for the planned team volunteering day.
- **Context enriches the experience**: participants were keen on learning more about the host organisation and site in addition to taking part in volunteering.
- **Clear expectations are important**: sharing details about what participants can expect, including the terrain/site, tasks and logistics helps volunteers prepare accordingly.
- **Strong communication between partners is key**: regular check-ins between the employer and volunteer-involving organisation help align expectations and ensure smoother delivery.

Overall, the pilot demonstrated that co-designed employee volunteering team days can create more meaningful experiences for all stakeholders. By bringing together employees, employers and volunteer-involving organisations as equal partners, the approach deepened partnership-working and improved volunteer engagement.

Knowledge Gateway

The Knowledge Gateway is created and led by **Volunteer Scotland**

Volunteer Scotland

This is a regularly reviewed resource. If you have any suggested updates, please email Volunteer Scotland at **hello@volunteerscotland.org.uk**