Case study: Ongoing individual volunteering – OATS and SEPA

Context

Employer-supported volunteering (ESV) can support employees to volunteer on an individual basis. The **Outdoor Access Trust for Scotland** (OATS) hosts a range of employee volunteers to do conservation work across Scotland. One example is ongoing participation of employees from the **Scottish Environment Protection Agency** (SEPA), who use their ESV days to take part in outdoor conservation projects.

Volunteering activity

Several SEPA employees volunteer with OATS throughout the year using their ESV days. Volunteers sign up through OATS' online volunteering portal and attend one-day conservation activities or multi-day trips during the volunteering season from March to November.

Activities mainly focus on upland path maintenance, but other conservation tasks include maintenance of community paths, tree planting and invasive species removal.

Most of the volunteering takes place in the Cairngorms National Park, although OATS also runs activities in other remote locations in Northwest Scotland. The outdoor, hands-on nature of the tasks often suits SEPA employees who are already interested in environmental protection and outdoor recreation.

OATS provides a range of support to ensure that participants feel confident and prepared, including:

- Knowledgeable staff leading activities and providing guidance
- First aid-trained leaders on site
- Tools, personal protective equipment and insurance are provided
- WhatsApp group chats for each event to support communication, car sharing and updates
- Opportunities to learn from experienced volunteers

- Accommodation and communal meals for multi-day trips
- Volunteers can participate as often as they like, with no minimum commitment required

Impact

For employees

Volunteering offers a chance to spend time outdoors, take part in physical activity and connect with others while contributing to environmental conservation.

One participant said: “I enjoy being physically active, particularly outdoors, and feel that it really benefits my mental health and wellbeing too. I love hillwalking and cycling, so it feels great to play a small part in maintaining the paths I enjoy using. This also benefits the environment, as more people will stick to well maintained paths. The volunteer days give me a boost for the rest of the work week. They are a great conversation topic with my colleagues and I encourage my colleagues to get involved, as it’s always a fun way to connect.”

For OATS

Volunteer contributions are essential to maintaining Scotland’s upland paths. Employee volunteers enable OATS to run weekday volunteering activities that would otherwise be difficult to find volunteers for.

Key learning

Key insights from OATS’ experience hosting employee volunteers include:

- **Match volunteers to the activity:** ensuring participants understand the tasks and skills required helps create a positive experience.
- **Look for aligned partners:** organisations with shared values and goals are more likely to develop long-term volunteering relationships.



SEPA employee volunteers helping with path maintenance. Credit: OATS.



Before and after of SEPA employee volunteers helping with path maintenance. Credit: OATS.

Knowledge Gateway

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