Case study: Organising team ESV opportunities – The Conservation Volunteers

Context

Organising team employer-supported volunteering (ESV) opportunities in environmental settings requires careful planning, collaboration with local stakeholders and a clear understanding of the site's ecological needs.

At Corstorphine Hill Reserve, **The Conservation Volunteers** established volunteering sessions to support habitat management and biodiversity improvement. The reserve is managed by City of Edinburgh Council and supported by local community volunteers from **Friends of Corstorphine Hill**.

The Conservation Volunteers set out to tackle invasive plant species that threaten the site's biodiversity while creating structured volunteering opportunities for employer teams.

Engaging local partners

The first step in establishing team volunteering at the reserve was to bring together the organisations already connected to the site.

This included contacting the council's Natural Heritage Officer to arrange an on-site walk-through to identify priority areas for conservation work. Local community groups were also consulted, particularly Friends of Corstorphine Hill, who regularly carry out maintenance activities and have strong local knowledge of the reserve.

Engaging these groups early helped ensure that volunteering activity complemented existing efforts and avoided duplication. Ongoing communication is also important, with quarterly updates shared with the Natural Heritage Officer to ensure everyone remains informed about progress.

Planning conservation work

Corstorphine Hill is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest, making careful ecological planning essential.

The understory has become overrun with invasive species including Himalayan Balsam, Salmonberry and Japanese Knotweed. These plants reduce biodiversity and require different management techniques depending on the species and time of year.

A task plan was developed that considered:

- Which species needed to be removed
- The most effective techniques for removal
- The times of year when work should take place
- Natural barriers or landscape features that could help prevent further spread

Scheduling volunteers

Once tasks were identified, a volunteering calendar was created for employer teams.

Dates are typically published two to four months in advance through an online portal that is shared with corporate partners. Organisations can then reserve volunteering days that suit their teams.

Some conservation tasks can only be completed at specific times of year. To increase the chances of completing these tasks, additional volunteering sessions are scheduled during key seasonal windows.

After a date is reserved, follow-up communications confirm practical details, expectations and health and safety requirements.

Delivering the volunteering days

Each volunteering session is carefully organised to ensure it runs smoothly and safely. Activities typically include demonstrations on how to safely use tools and equipment and clear guidance on the tasks to be completed during the session

Organisers also plan days with future sessions in mind, considering how much can realistically be achieved before seasonal changes or plant growth stages affect the work.

Because the reserve is a well-used public space, maintaining the appearance of the site is important. Work areas are kept tidy and presentable so that visitors can clearly see the positive impact of the conservation work.

Key learning

Key insights from The Conservation Volunteers' experience with organising ESV include:

- **Work closely with local stakeholders:** engaging with those who use and know a site ensures that volunteering tasks align with local priorities and avoids duplication.
- **Provide clear guidance and training:** demonstrating how to use tools and sharing safety expectations helps volunteers feel confident and able to contribute meaningfully.
- **Communicate in advance and follow up afterwards:** sharing schedules, expectations and updates keeps volunteers engaged and stakeholders all on the same page.



Employee volunteers helping with conservatin volunteering at Corstorphine Hill Reserve. Credit: The Conservation Volunteers.

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