Case study: Team volunteering – NatureScot

Context

Team volunteering days can provide opportunities for employees to contribute to local communities while strengthening relationships across teams. Since 2018, **NatureScot** has encouraged employees to use up to two volunteering days each year, supporting environmental and community initiatives that benefit both nature and people.

One example is a partnership between NatureScot staff and **Highland Hospice**, which operates the **Ness Islands Railway** in Inverness to raise funds for its services.

Volunteering activity

The volunteering was initiated when NatureScot staff approached the Highland Hospice to ask if there were outdoor tasks they could help with. The Highland Hospice volunteer coordinator then connected them with the Ness Islands Railway volunteer team, who work alongside NatureScot volunteers on the day to progress tasks.

NatureScot employees have volunteered 6 times at the Ness Islands Railway, and supported a range of outdoor maintenance and improvement activities, including:

- Clearing leaves and branches from the railway track and putting these into wildlife piles and natural barriers
- General tidying and grounds maintenance
- Preparing ground for hedge planting
- Painting decorative concrete animals along the railway track
- Carrying out track maintenance, including replacing wooden boards under the track
- Providing advice on wildlife gardening and planting pollinator-friendly plants such as flowers and apple trees

As outdoor work can often be quite physical, mini railway staff work with volunteers on the day to be flexible and identify a variety of potential tasks.

Impact

For employees

Volunteering offers staff the chance to get outdoors, take a break from desk-based work and spend time connecting with colleagues in an informal setting. The activities encourage teamwork and conversation across teams that may not normally work together.

One participant said: "I chose to help the Highland Hospice Ness Islands Railway. They need volunteers to help maintain the railway and its grounds including track maintenance, leaf clearing, creating natural fences, planting and hedge planting prep. I've used three volunteering days so far. I fancied using my days locally with colleagues, so I set up volunteering sessions with support from colleagues. I have really enjoyed supporting a local charity whilst also getting a chance to catch up with colleagues, get some fresh air and exercise. I am proud of the support we've given to the amazing group of volunteers who run the railway. It's always a fun, satisfying day and it contributes significantly to the Highland Hospice's fundraising."

For NatureScot

The volunteering days support NatureScot's commitment to encouraging staff participation in nature-based activities while strengthening workplace relationships. Employees return to work feeling re-energised, with improved wellbeing and motivation.

For Highland Hospice

The additional volunteer capacity makes a significant difference to maintaining and improving the railway site. Highland Hospice said: "Having a squad of people once or twice a year can make a real difference, especially after the winter when a lot needs done. One visit by a group of six is an extra six days' work for us. It's also great to meet people from outside our wee railway bubble."

The work helps maintain the railway as a visitor attraction that generates vital funds for the hospice while also improving biodiversity and the experience for visitors.

Key learning

Key insights from NatureScot's experience with ESV include:

- **Keep volunteering simple and local:** activities that are easy to organise and close to home increase participation.
- **Be flexible with tasks:** if some tasks on the day can be physically demanding, providing a range of activities ensures everyone can take part.
- **Build relationships with host organisations:** returning to the same partner helps volunteers feel more connected and effective.



NatureScot staff volunteering at Ness Islands Railway. Credit: Highland Hospice.

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**