Case study: Tree planting volunteering days – Scottish Water

Context

The **Scottish Water** Employee Volunteering Programme gives all employees 2 volunteering days per year covering five broad strands - Local Community, Environment, Education, Skills Based and WaterAid (charity partner).

As part of their Employee Volunteering Programme, Scottish Water organises regular tree planting volunteer events, giving employees the chance to plant a variety of tree species close to scenic Scottish Water Reservoirs. This tree planting work forms part of the company's wider woodland creation programme, which aims to improve biodiversity and lock up carbon emissions, while also helping protect source water quality against climate change at operational reservoirs across the country.

Volunteering activity

Employees can sign up through the Scottish Water ESV programme to take part in planting native trees at reservoir sites across Scotland, including Cocksburn, Carron Valley, Backwater, and Knowes Dean Reservoirs, primarily between October and March for optimal seasonal conditions.

The activities are facilitated by Scottish Water's team of Reservoir Rangers. The business employs a number of Rangers who patrol Scottish Water's most popular reservoirs, engaging with local communities on key topics such as the Scottish Outdoor Access Code and water safety. In addition to these duties, the Rangers coordinate a range of on-site initiatives, with volunteer tree-planting sessions becoming a core part of the team's remit.

These sessions are promoted through internal channels, enabling employees to register their interest, while selected opportunities are also shared with local community groups to create a balance of opportunities for both employees and local communities.

Rangers provide participants with all necessary information in advance, including risk assessments, and deliver a health and safety briefing on the day. They also manage the logistics of transporting planting equipment to and from each site.

Scottish Water's Woodland Creation Team delivers woodland projects as part of the organisation's wider net-zero and land-management programme and provides valuable support for these events. Their work focuses on establishing native woodland across Scottish Water land, particularly in reservoir catchments, to enhance biodiversity, increase carbon storage and help safeguard drinking-water quality by stabilising soils and reducing runoff. For tree planting volunteer days, the team will support delivery by advising on appropriate locations and species selection, as well as providing practical demonstrations to ensure planting is carried out to the required standard, maximising survival rates and environmental benefit.

Volunteers are kept engaged beyond a single activity through follow-up communications that share the impact of their contribution. This includes the number of trees planted and estimated carbon savings. Participants are then invited back to sites for future maintenance and wider environmental initiatives, enabling them to witness the longer-term benefits of their efforts. This ongoing involvement helps foster a sense of ownership, strengthen connection to place and sustain motivation and pride in supporting the sites.

Impact

Volunteering tree planting sessions have made a meaningful difference for employees, Scottish Water, delivery partners and local communities.

For Scottish Water, these volunteer days directly support delivery of their woodland creation programme, helping turn planned schemes into reality on the ground. By involving employees and local volunteers in planting native woodland, the activity contributes to improved biodiversity, long term carbon sequestration and the protection of source water quality around reservoirs. Woodland creation helps stabilise soils, reduce surface water runoff and improve catchment resilience, supporting Scottish Water's wider environmental and net zero ambitions while protecting the water supplies they manage.

For employees, taking part in hands-on planting has helped build a strong sense of ownership and pride in Scottish Water's land and environmental work. Being physically involved in creating new woodland allows people to see the tangible impact of their contribution, strengthening understanding of how nature-based solutions support Scottish Water's core purpose. Volunteering days also bring together colleagues from different teams and locations, helping to build relationships across the business, encourage collaboration, and support wellbeing by spending time outdoors on meaningful activities.

One participant, Graeme McLaren, Senior Performance Analyst (Scottish Water), said: "It was very well organised, both in terms of information provided in advance and on the day itself. The Scottish Water Ranger, Josh, did a great job facilitating the day with a good balance of professionalism and informality to create an enjoyable and rewarding experience with a great group of people."

For external volunteers and partners including local trusts, delivery partners and community volunteers, the sessions demonstrate Scottish Water's commitment to partnership working. By opening up sites for volunteering, Scottish Water strengthens relationships with organisations who share environmental goals and create opportunities for communities to engage positively with local reservoirs. This collaborative approach helps build trust, increases local support for woodland creation projects, and ensures schemes deliver wider social and environmental value beyond the immediate planting activity.

One participant, Andrew Lacey, Chief Operating Officer at iGii, said: "We were delighted to partner with Scottish Water to help achieve their net zero goals by planting trees to help offset their carbon emissions. Though it was cold and windy, we had a fantastic time, and we all benefitted mentally from the outdoor activity. We hope to see the fruits of our labour in the coming years as the trees grow and the forests connect."

Overall, these volunteering sessions have helped embed woodland creation as a shared endeavour – delivering environmental outcomes while connecting people to place, strengthening partnerships, and reinforcing Scottish Water's role as a responsible landowner.

Key learning

Key insights from Scottish Water's experience with managing ESV include:

- **Build a strong volunteer network:** Maintain a dedicated distribution list for ESV opportunities, including all previous participants, to keep volunteers connected and engaged.
- **Celebrate volunteer impact:** Sharing the impact of volunteer contributions reinforces the value of participation.
- **Encourage repeat engagement**: Invite volunteers back for similar initiatives to sustain involvement and deepen connection to the sites.



Scottish Water staff volunteering planting trees at Carron Valley Reservoir. Credit: Scottish Water.



Scottish Water employees and local community members volunteering planting trees at Knowes Dean Reservoir. Credit: Scottish Water.

Knowledge Gateway

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