Case study: Co-designing employee volunteering – Volunteer Scotland and NatureScot

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 Volunteer Scotland and **Nature Scot** work together to co-design a team ESV day at Loch Leven National Nature Reserve.

Partner profiles

Employer: Volunteer Scotland

Sector: Voluntary

Number of employees: 31

Volunteer Scotland is the national centre for volunteering, providing practical volunteer management guidance and research insights, and influencing public policy. Volunteer Scotland is a charity and is part of the infrastructure that supports volunteering across Scotland.

Volunteer Scotland offers their employees three days of paid volunteering leave every year (pro-rated for part time employees). Employees can organise their own volunteering activities for organisations of their choice. Previously some ad hoc team ESV activities were offered for staff to participate in; however, uptake was often low and this had not been organised in recent years post-pandemic.

Volunteer-involving organisation: NatureScot

Sector: Public Sector

Number of employees: 800

NatureScot is Scotland's nature agency, working to improve the natural environment in Scotland and inspiring people to care more about it. NatureScot manages 29 National Nature Reserves.

Loch Leven National Nature Reserve, the site of the ESV day, is one of the most significant wetland sites in the UK. It supports internationally important populations of wintering and breeding waterbirds. NatureScot manages the loch, islands and a fringe of mixed habitats around the shores. Volunteers participate in 'work parties' most Wednesdays and support the upkeep of the reserve.

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 Volunteer Scotland employees to generate ideas for volunteering activities and explore practical considerations.
3. **Reflection and join planning:** Workshop outputs were reviewed by Volunteer Scotland, NatureScot and Make Your Mark to develop a practical plan for the volunteering day

The team volunteering day

After re-scheduling the January team volunteering day due to a yellow weather warning, eight Volunteer Scotland employees headed to Loch Leven on 2nd April 2026 for a day of volunteering alongside NatureScot staff. Staff travelled together to make the day accessible to everyone, including those who lived far away from the site, and timings had been agreed ahead of time to ensure staff who needed to would still be able to do the school run. After a short boat ride to the work site, volunteers received a tool and safety briefing and were provided with the necessary equipment and protective gear and offered a range of activities.

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

- **Building habitats**: Volunteers used willow to build a ‘dead hedge’ as a shelter for birds and other wildlife, to promote biodiversity and enrich soil. This involved learning how to use a traditional billhook to make the stakes to support the hedge.
- **Tree and seed planting**: Volunteers planted willow trees and yellow rattle seeds, levelling molehills around the edge of the lake to create a wildflower meadow and layers of different habitats for birds to use.
- **Sapling management:** Volunteers built protection barriers around small tree saplings so that they can grow without damage from local deer.
- **Mulching**: Volunteers used grass cuttings and other natural materials to mulch around the edge of the loch, to conserve moisture, suppress weeds and encourage biodiversity.

Impact

For employee volunteers

Participants reporting having a positive experience, particularly enjoying being outside in nature, working on a meaningful task and bonding with colleagues. Based on feedback forms received from seven of the eight volunteers, 100% said that the team volunteering day made them feel more connected with colleagues, that they felt that they’d made a difference and that it boosted their health and wellbeing. 85% said that they developed new skills or learned new things through the team volunteering day. They also said:

- “BEST DAY EVER!!! Thank you for organising and investing in a work volunteering day – great way to bond and get to know each other better outside the office.”
- “The people at NatureScot who took us on the day were really welcoming and pleasant.”
- “The entire day was very enjoyable! Loved being out in nature, being on the boat and wielding the billhook.”
- “I liked being outside, connecting with colleagues and feeling like I was doing a meaningful task for NatureScot.”
- “Really loved the volunteering day, it was great spending the day doing something different with colleagues and the place itself was fab and I feel like we made a difference - even if it was just a small difference.”

For Volunteer Scotland

The volunteering day provided employees with an opportunity to step away from their usual work environment and spend time outdoors, learning new skills while contributing to a meaningful cause. It also gave colleagues from different parts of the organisation to connect in an informal setting, and an opportunity to volunteer for people who usually don't have time to do so. Based on positive feedback, Volunteer Scotland are planning to run a team volunteering day on an annual basis.

For NatureScot

Hosting Volunteer Scotland staff for a volunteer day enabled us to carry out some very useful tasks that will benefit both nature and people at Loch Leven National Nature Reserve. It also introduced new people to the Reserve and provided an opportunity for us to promote the benefits of outdoor activity. The volunteer day raised awareness of the importance of nature-based volunteering and led to positive interactions between a range of people.

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 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 organisations help align expectations and ensure smoother delivery.

Overall, the pilot demonstrated that co-design 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**

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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**