How to keep volunteers happy and engaged

A six-point guide

SEMBLE

Come together. Make a change.

What to use this guide for

The current surge in enthusiasm for volunteering is creating opportunities for community projects to mobilise some extra energy and know-how.

Volunteers can bring so much value - time, passion, energy and expertise. And they can gain a huge amount through volunteering too - community, purpose, experience. It's a two way relationship and it's important to recognise that by deciding to work with volunteers you are committing to supporting those individuals.

This guide was created to help you keep volunteers engaged, happy and effective in their work. It was put together using the lived experience and practical advice from community projects in the Semble network, the Semble team and partner organisation BUD.

Strategies for engaging volunteers - the 6 Cs

Your volunteers will stick around and work well if they feel:

- connected to the project, team and service users **- Connection**
- clear on their work, involved and heard **- Communication**
- that their work is useful, effective and well-managed **- Coordination**
- cared for, looked after, and have their needs met **- Care**
- acknowledged and appreciated **- Celebration**
- heard and embedded in the project **- Co-creation**

Connection

Remember that many people volunteer because they want to feel connected to others and to their community. Ensure the role provides space and opportunity for them to do this.

Create a warm welcome for new volunteers
Never overlook the importance of a good introduction!

Share with them the 'why'
As part of the induction process share the organisation's aims, mission and values. Helping people to understand the all-important 'why' behind their role will motivate them in their work.

Get to know your volunteers' motivations and reasons for volunteering
Put a little time into understanding them as a person and what they want to get out of the role.

Create opportunities for informal and social meet-ups
Volunteers want to feel part of a community. Getting together socially helps to create that, so organise ways for volunteers to get to know the team and longer-term volunteers with coffee-mornings, time at the pub, social zooms, etc.

Communication

Keep it regular, transparent and clear!

Getting new volunteers involved

Make sure that interested volunteers aren't kept waiting too long.

Don't lose that enthusiasm!

Don't feel that you have to say yes to all volunteers.

Be guided by the project's needs and match volunteers to suit. Respond positively even when saying no, and keep their contact details. Even if you don't need them immediately you may have work for them later.

Create a good induction process so volunteers receive all the information they need. Good communication at the start will save you time in the long run!

Be clear about what is involved and what your expectations are.
Make sure their expectations align with yours. You may want to create a volunteer agreement which lays out the commitments and expectations for both sides. This can be a simple list of bullet points.

Keep a database or file of your volunteers' contact details and important information so you can easily contact them. Some projects use an online database like Salesforce, but an Excel spreadsheet can do the job too!

Audit their skills through a survey or form.
This is very helpful in knowing what skills your team has and who to ask for certain tasks. You might find out that someone is a whizz at design/sewing/Excel/etc. Invite unusual skills to be shared too! But also respect that people may not always want to utilise a certain skill. That's their choice.

Staying in touch

Organise regular check-ins to stay in touch. Make it clear where and how these will happen (in person, zoom, over the phone) and how often you will be doing this.

Get to grips with online communication tools. It's worth it because they will be here to stay post-pandemic. Slack, WhatsApp, Zoom and Google Hangouts can be great tools for both one-to-one and group communication.

But do remember some volunteers are less tech-savvy so it's good to have a variety of ways to stay in touch.

Send call-outs for specific tasks or skills via your comms channels to see who can help - e.g. 'can anyone help with building some plant beds?'

Make meetings effective

Meetings are a key communication tool. A little thought goes a long way to making them productive spaces. Here are our top tips:

- **Create and share a clear agenda** so everyone has similar expectations for the meeting and discussions stay on track.

- **Use the POP meetings tool** to create the agenda. It's a super simple tool that helps you plan and structure meetings. We can't recommend it enough! (*Click through for info*).

- **Think about the space** - it sounds obvious but check that the meeting space is appropriate for the number of people and format, i.e. it's hard for a larger group to be heard in a noisy pub.

- **Break it up** - if large meetings are feeling challenging, try breaking into subgroups so everyone can get involved and tasks delegated. Zoom breakout rooms can be helpful.

Coordination

Having good systems for managing volunteers will make your work easier and improve how much volunteers can achieve.

It takes time to manage volunteers well!
Be aware of this and factor in the time to your team's workload. If you have underestimated, update your estimates and try to keep improving the process.

Be clear on the responsibilities for coordinating volunteers.
Make sure it's clear amongst the team who is responsible for managing each volunteer's tasks. Use rotas and planners to show who is responsible for which tasks and when. A rota will help to organise volunteering under social distancing guidelines too.

Use more experienced volunteers to support.
Recruit assistant volunteer leaders for bigger projects if needed, pair volunteers up, consider whether longer-term volunteers can mentor or oversee newer volunteers.

Spend time developing clear processes for how volunteers will be recruited, trained and supported. These don't have to be long or fancy documents - they can be a simple checklist or list of bullet points. Though it takes time upfront, these processes will help make your work much easier.

Create a role description.
Even if this only is a simple description of tasks for more straightforward roles.

Use signs and checklists.
If the work is location-specific use these to convey task instructions, e.g. 'if the plant beds seem dry grab a watering can' or 'complete this checklist of tasks when doing your shift'. This can save time and provide clarity.

Care

Create a supportive, caring environment for your volunteers. If they feel looked after they are more likely to stick around and keep investing their time!

Safeguarding

Make sure activities and work are organised to actively prevent risk of harm. Safeguarding does not have to be too difficult or time consuming. Consider the risks involved and then manage those risks to make sure volunteers feel safe. Do risk assessments where needed. Make sure volunteers have the equipment they need and understand what to do in challenging situations.

Care for volunteers' welfare

Make space in your check-ins to find out how they are coping and address any challenges. Keep volunteers fed, watered and warm enough - providing hot/cold drinks and snack breaks are simple things but make the world of difference.

Create opportunities for learning and growth

If you can somehow support their skills development, volunteers are way more likely to stick around. Not every project can offer formal training but there are still plenty of things you can do...

How to support learning and growth:

- Ask if they have any aims for professional development

- Take a broad view of skills development - this can include communication skills, literacy and numeracy, social skills, creative skills, digital literacy and more.

- Signpost to any helpful information, resources and opportunities you know of (both internal to your organisation and external).

- See whether you can support volunteers to work towards recognised qualifications or official recognitions - the Ault Achievement Awards and SQA awards are just two schemes some projects are using

- Run short informal internal training sessions, facilitated by team members

- Signpost volunteers to free external training sessions - there are so many free opportunities out there so keep your eye out!

Celebration

Make volunteers feel acknowledged and appreciated by expressing gratitude and through celebration of their work.

Never underestimate the power of a thank you! Personalised or handwritten thank you notes make people feel really appreciated. Tell people how their work is making a difference.

Share their stories and achievements in newsletters, social media and other communications. This can be internally - so staff and volunteers are aware - and/or to your wider network. Trial a regular column or feature which highlights what's being achieved.

Use awards schemes or reward schemes to recognise volunteers' hard work. Create an internal scheme and/or look for industry-wide awards you can nominate volunteers for.

Use community events to celebrate with the wider community. This is an opportunity for volunteers to bring along friends, family and carers and show them their work. This often leads to new connections and volunteers, and further integrates your project with the wider community. Use these events to present awards and give thanks to volunteers.
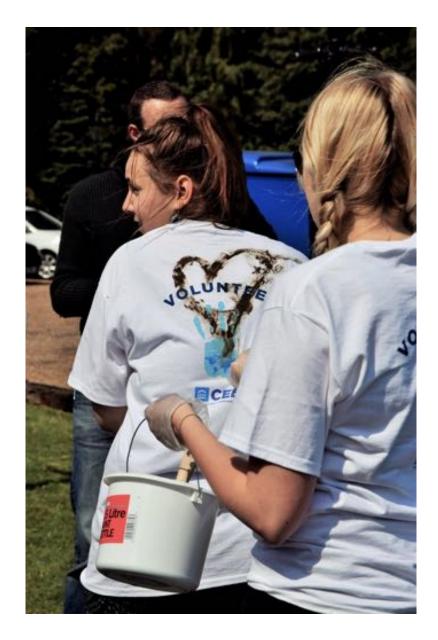
Co-creation

Empower volunteers by asking for their ideas, opinions and feedback. When people feel consulted they want to contribute more of their energy to a project. They also bring fresh ideas and new insights.

Ways to hear and incorporate volunteers' ideas

- Invite volunteers to brainstorming and planning sessions

- Create all team meetings which include volunteers as well as staff

- Use their feedback to improve and develop project work. Gain this feedback through your check-ins, informal chats and feedback forms

- Develop and improve your management processes in consultation with volunteers, using their feedback to develop efficient working systems

Ways to hear and incorporate volunteers' ideas

- Entrust long term volunteers with more autonomy

- Create subgroups or working groups on specific project areas which include volunteers. Volunteers can be directed to the most appropriate subgroup, based on their passions.

- If you have lots of volunteers consider creating a Volunteer Forum, which can be a place for feedback, concerns and ideas. Volunteer Reps from the Forum can be used to ensure strong links between volunteers, the staff team and the Board.

Thanks to everyone who contributed their wisdom and ideas to help make this guide

Special thanks to:

- The team from BUD
- The team from Bridge End Farmhouse
- The team from Hazel Hill Wood
- The 30+ projects who who shared their wisdom in our online workshop on 'Managing volunteers'
- The Semble team

You can find more helpful tips and practical guides to help you make change happen at **semble.org**

SEMBLE

BUD

Come together. Make a change.