



Forestry England

Volunteer Strategy

2021–26

Vision

Outstanding
volunteering
across the
nation's forests.



Setting the scene

For over 40 years volunteers have made a major contribution to our business. Forestry England is committed to providing a wide range of inspiring and unique opportunities to encourage woodland engagement through volunteering for the nation's forests.

Over the past five years Forestry England has standardised our volunteer processes and systems to enable our unique and rewarding volunteer programmes to be delivered with greater consistency, efficiency and impact. We have developed and implemented the core building blocks for volunteering to grow.

With the challenges that coronavirus has brought including pausing our volunteer programme for brief moments across the nation's forests, it has highlighted the important role volunteers play in supporting our teams and the forests they manage. Now is the time to build on our great success of the past 40 years and look to inspire more vital and rewarding volunteering opportunities over the next 100 years. We will be inclusive by engaging effectively with our volunteers, staff and reaching out to wider diverse communities who may not be represented in current and past volunteering demographics.

With the core building blocks in place it is time to move forward to enable volunteering to continue to flourish.

The support volunteers provide to Forestry England has become essential to our day-to-day management, forming part of our core business. We have a strong mix of volunteering opportunities from those directly engaging with Forestry England, partnerships and third-party volunteering agreements. Volunteers have essential roles in all elements of the organisation including:

- 273 volunteers working in all areas of the business at Westonbirt Arboretum, with many supporting day-to-day management. Without their critical support, we have seen through COVID-19 the challenges this brings to us to welcome the public to the arboretum and the enhanced offer our volunteers provide to our visitors.
- Volunteers embedded in the Forest Live and Active Forest programmes helping us to deliver outstanding customer service and innovation.
- Volunteer Rangers in the New Forest and Shadow Rangers in Central England leading weekly volunteer work parties, surveying priority habitats and developing land management expertise.

Success will depend on us continuing to integrate our volunteer programmes throughout our organisation.

In 2019/20 we had:

38,700 volunteer experiences

Over 175,446 hours contributed by volunteers – that is over 103 work years!

Over £2 million of benefit to the nation's forests from our volunteers

As we look outward to organisations and services such as the NHS, we can see that they also appreciate the benefits volunteering can make to support the essential work they deliver. So much so, the NHS worked with the Daily Mail to recruit a Helpforce of 33,000 volunteers providing critical support to the NHS across a range of services. The campaign secured 1.8 million hours of support to the NHS.¹

Helpforce stated that '90 per cent of staff believe volunteering adds a lot of value for patients and 74 per cent said they also add value for staff'.²

In both the charity and public sectors volunteering is becoming an integral part of how organisations meet the growing demands of society and competition for volunteers is increasing. So we must continue to develop our volunteer offer both directly through Forestry England and also with our partner organisations and third party agreements. This will enable us to deliver a diverse and rewarding programme that meets the needs of our volunteers, our forests, and our business.

Volunteers directly benefit from working with us in our forests, leading to new skills, improved health and wellbeing and social engagement. In our recent volunteer survey 93% of volunteers said they were 'happy' or 'very happy' volunteering with Forestry England. This compares well to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations' (NCVO's) national survey Time Well Spent which showed 96% of volunteers were very or fairly satisfied with their volunteering.³

However, 26% of our volunteers felt that we needed to improve how we act upon their feedback. We need to get the balance right between getting on with the job and supporting our volunteers effectively. Data taken from Time Well Spent shows that public sector volunteers are twice as likely to agree that their volunteering is 'too structured or formalised' than civil society volunteers.

We will build on our strong foundations to improve our professional, rewarding and fun volunteer programmes, and embrace the NCVO's eight key areas for a quality volunteer experience (please see diagram on page 7).

Each of the eight elements is important for delivering a superb volunteer experience and Forestry England will strive to achieve this. Our strategy focuses particularly on five elements which are more relevant to the Forestry England volunteering offer. These are:

- Flexible
- Impactful
- Enjoyable
- Balanced
- Inclusive

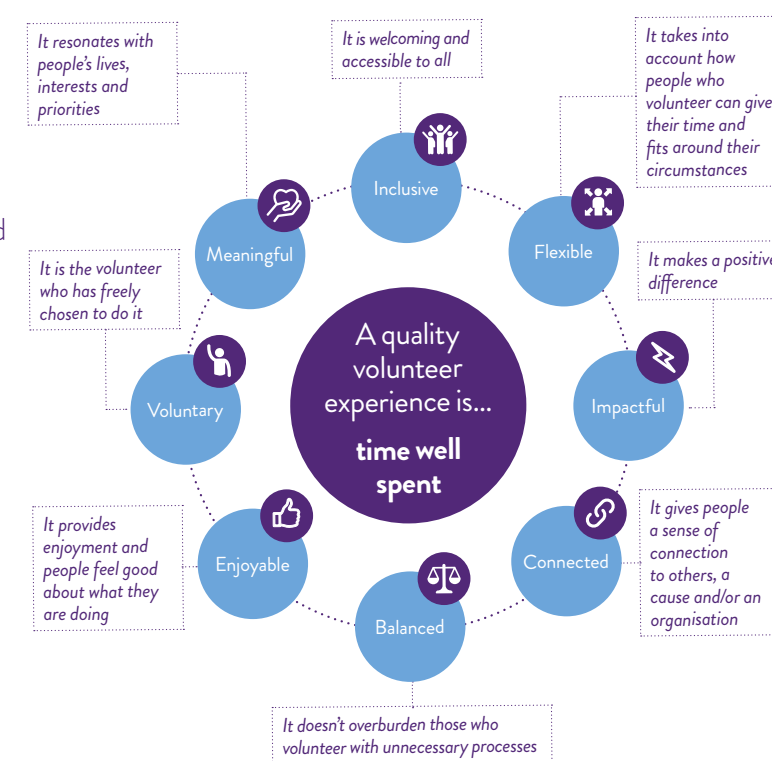
These will enable us to work to our vision to deliver outstanding volunteering across the nation's forests.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Section 9 summarises some of our key learnings from across the research. It identifies a number of areas for organisations to think about if they want to support people in having a quality volunteer experience. It also looks at what the findings might mean for policy, in the context of current societal trends.

The research suggests **eight key features that make up a quality experience** for volunteers and may be considered by volunteer-involving organisations, government and civil society more broadly when looking at the challenges and opportunities of volunteering.

Across these, our overall conclusion is that **at its best, volunteering is time well spent.**



4 Volunteer context

5 Volunteer experience

6 Volunteer Impacts

7 Volunteer Retention

8 Looking Ahead

9 Conclusions and implications

10 Appendices

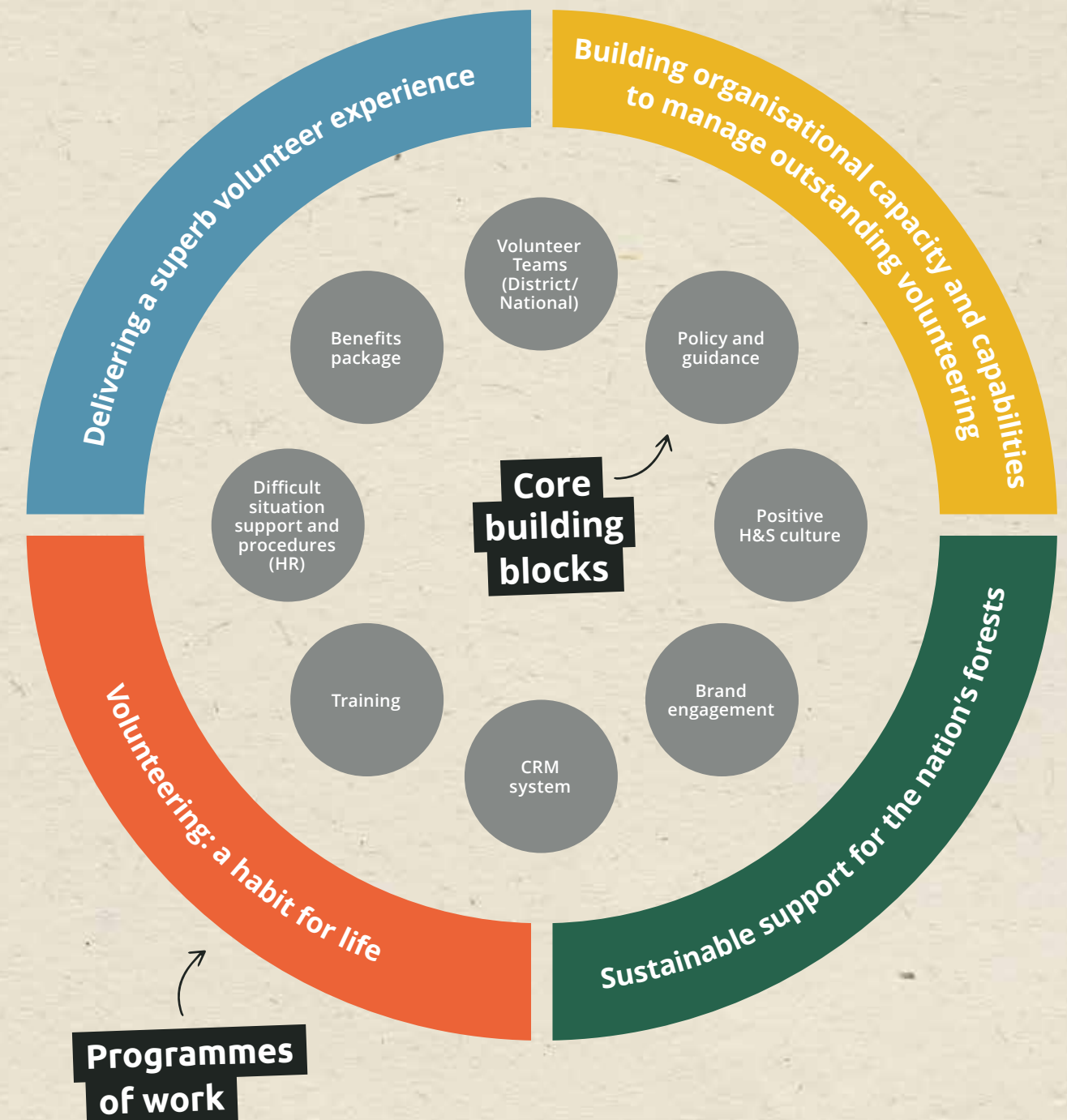
¹ Dame Christine Beasley, Trustee at Burdet Trust for Nursing, Helpforce Annual Report 2019

² Helpforce Annual Report 2018-19

³ NCVO Jan 2019 - Time Well Spent Report

Programmes of work

We will achieve our vision through delivering four key programmes of work in partnership with districts and our volunteers.



Delivering a superb volunteer experience



We will continue to build on our varied and open volunteering programme which is delivered across the nation’s forests by our eclectic and passionate volunteers, whether they are part of a Forestry England delivered programme, Friends of Groups, specialist interest, partnership or third party agreements. All volunteering activity across the nation’s forests is vital to the management for today and tomorrow.

As volunteer programmes are developed or through our regular review process, it is important that we ensure that each volunteer programme continues to meet the needs of our sites, our staff and of course our volunteers and the wider community. This will enable our volunteer programmes to support delivery of our wider organisation’s aspirations, while enabling our volunteers to enjoy their time with us. We must recognise that our volunteers have chosen to give their spare time to support Forestry England and the place they love. So, we must provide high quality experiences, both to recognise and thank them for their ongoing support and understanding that providing a high-quality offer will keep and attract volunteers’ support for the nation’s forests, while also enabling our staff to engage with volunteers more effectively. We will achieve this by developing and improving five key work areas:



Systems and processes

To deliver a professional and sustainable volunteer programme, we need to ensure we have systems and processes which support and enable volunteering to thrive. Our systems and processes must make it easy to find out about volunteering, to apply and become a volunteer and to receive the training and support needed to have a successful, rewarding, and beneficial experience. We must improve the information we have about our volunteers and the roles they complete to show the scale of our volunteer programme. This is a core step for us to effectively support our volunteers and enable us to diversify the engagement of volunteers active across Forestry England’s sites.

To achieve this we need to be supported by effective and efficient technology. While many volunteers (90%) feel it is easy and straightforward to start volunteering, some groups, including young people (22%), expect the process to be quicker, with 24% feeling there is too much bureaucracy in volunteering.⁴

We must continue to develop a fit-for-purpose online volunteer system for staff and volunteers, enabling effective online recruitment, induction, and training, complemented by paper-based systems where required. An improved system will provide a more flexible approach to volunteering which is accessible to all.

Safety at our heart

Having a rewarding and safe volunteer experience is, and must continue to be, at the heart of our volunteer programme. We will keep building on the extensive work completed between districts, health and safety and the national volunteer team to ensure that all those participating in volunteer activity do so in a safe and responsible manner. We will build on our good practice by:

- Developing an effective induction programme that: welcomes everyone to an outstanding organisation; supports staff and volunteers to feel part of the team; and enables volunteers to effectively do their role from day one.
- Investing in our supervisors, by supporting those managing volunteers to grow through effective leadership and volunteer management training, enabling them to engage in professional development specific to their role.
- Working with our training team and specialists to develop accessible and engaging training for volunteers, looking to challenge ourselves on new ways to deliver training which meets the needs of the roles and our volunteers.
- Developing an effective and supportive audit programme, so we can reflect, review and develop; ensuring lessons are shared about successes and failures.

Working together with partners and third party groups for superb forests

Working alongside district teams we will continue to build strong relationships with partners and third party organisations, recognising the huge contribution these groups make. In 2019/20 partnership and third party volunteer projects delivered 50% of our volunteer activity. This equated to over £950,000 of support for the nation’s forests.

Our volunteer programme is complex with a vast reach so we need to build a stronger understanding of our partners and third party groups. This will enable us to provide them with the support they need to continue to grow and develop for the long term.





Volunteer communications

It is important for us to celebrate our volunteers' achievements and the teams which support them across the nation's forests. Responding to feedback from our volunteers, 59% felt that we need to improve on listening to their feedback, with 68% feeling actions taken after receiving feedback also needed to be improved. This is a clear message: we need to look beyond getting the task done and moving on, and take the time to listen and reflect on the experience of our volunteers.

Working with our communications team and volunteers themselves, we will develop accessible, engaging and relevant comms across a variety of channels. We are already learning from existing channels such as our National Volunteer Facebook group, used to engage through COVID-19; Westonbirt Volunteer Newsletter; Central Districts Yammer Channel; Roots and the Membership newsletter. This will be achieved through creating an effective communications plan to be delivered both nationally and locally, with the support of our Marketing and Communications team.

Recognising our volunteers

We will recognise, celebrate and showcase the amazing work and achievements of our volunteers and staff, both as individuals and groups, as they support the nation's forests.

This will be included in the work described above and we will build an external platform to showcase and celebrate the work of our volunteers and the strong partnerships which enables many of these programmes to flourish.

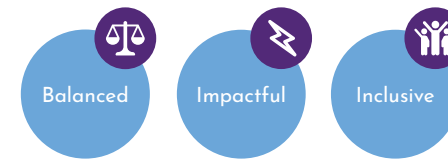
We have reviewed the extra benefits we give our volunteers and will continue to recognise the vast contribution they make. This will include the continuation of the volunteer parking pass for their local forest for all Forestry England directed volunteers. We will introduce a new service award that celebrates their ongoing support.



Building organisational capacity and capability to manage outstanding volunteering



To enable us to provide a contemporary and effective volunteering resource we need to develop new and creative volunteering opportunities into our teams, their programmes and emerging areas of work.



Currently, volunteering is seen as something that is delivered mostly by our recreation teams, although their achievements support many areas of the organisation such as events, survey work, trail maintenance and woodland management.

For our volunteer programme to become more efficient and professional, we need to change that perception and understand that volunteering is a team effort delivered across the whole organisation. We will work with district and national colleagues in five key work areas:

Develop our staff with volunteer management and supervision training

We will continue to develop accessible, engaging and purposeful training for our staff to supervise and manage volunteers and partnership projects effectively and professionally. Understanding that strong supervision, management and leaderships skills are needed for our staff to be able to manage the outstanding volunteer programme we strive for. We will also equip our staff with training to support diversity and inclusion to enable an inclusive and welcoming culture for all.

To complement our formal training programme, we will build a community of practitioners across our staff network to build peer support; share news, ask questions and swap resources through both digital and face-to-face networking.

Training and development for our volunteers

Equipping our volunteers with the skills and resources they need to complete their role effectively and safely is essential to us providing a professional volunteer programme. Our training programme must be relevant and appropriate to the roles being undertaken. With the support of our technical training team we will provide a training and development programme which enables our existing volunteers to complete their role with ease, while also supporting us to attract, welcome and retain a more diverse range of volunteers.

As we build our training programme we intend to share resources and opportunities with our partners and third party groups to build capacity and expertise for all volunteers.

Forestry England: an outstanding organisation for volunteering

While we will always take opportunities to improve, Forestry England should spotlight the already outstanding achievements which our volunteers, staff and partner organisations deliver across the nation's forests. We should be proud to showcase this work and share our experiences with the wider volunteer sector, because we understand that we can learn from each other about how we can deliver outstanding volunteering opportunities. We will do this by:

- Showcasing the breadth of volunteering activity through online and traditional communication channels.
- Engaging more effectively with the volunteer sector, including the Association of Volunteer Managers (AVM), NCVO and Environmental Volunteer Group (EVG).
- Reviewing our programmes against feedback from our volunteers and staff, while also completing annual audits against our internal policy and guidance.
- Continuing to support and develop our staff to manage our volunteer programmes to a high standard.
- Widening the diversity of our volunteer pool through continuing and expanding outreach into diverse communities and supporting partnership with diverse groups.

Succession planning

Planning is at the heart of what Forestry England does to manage the nation's forests. We must take this approach to our volunteer programme by building a sustainable and robust team. This will be achieved by:

- Building capacity and capability in our staff to professionally support our volunteers. These essential skills support individuals to be effective and supportive leaders.
- Developing our lead volunteer programme to grow our volunteer offer. We have already seen the great success of skilled volunteers taking on the leadership and delivery of volunteer sessions, including the Volunteer Ranger programme in the New Forest. Such roles enable us to grow our offer and complete essential work while also enabling volunteers to bring new skills, ideas, support and passion to our volunteer programme and to Forestry England as a whole.

Shadow Volunteer

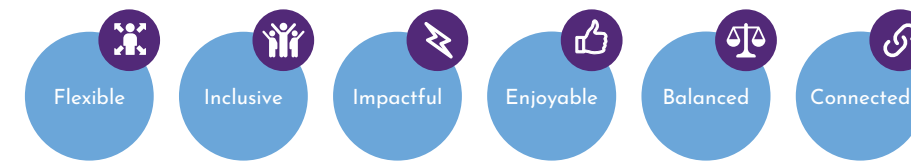
Over the past 15 years, Central Forest District has built a strong and successful shadow ranger programme, which delivers 6–10 individual volunteer opportunities across many areas of their business. This programme enables individuals to learn all elements of a specific role over six months, enabling them to gain practical experience, which supports them to develop careers within the sector, or consider options for further education. This programme has been extremely successful in supporting individuals entering the environmental sector, along with staff seeing the positive and focussed contribution each shadow ranger makes while working alongside them.

We will build on Central District's experience to develop an England-wide programme which builds capacity and capability across the business from land management, to marketing and estates. We will support individuals to gain the skills they need to help them develop a career in the forestry and environmental sector. Our shadow ranger programme will continue to forge links with our apprenticeship and graduate trainee programmes to build strong applicants for future recruitments into Forestry England and the wider forestry and environmental sector.



Volunteering: a habit for life

We believe there's potential to increase volunteers from all stages in life supporting the nation's forests, so we will provide opportunities and a call to action to engage, which meets their interests and availability. We will do this by developing programmes which consider all areas of inclusivity to enable more effective engagement with the community as a whole.



To achieve this we need to recognise the change in society in three key areas:

- It is now 'cool to care' and to care about local, national and international environmental issues. The climate change emergency is at the forefront of community concerns, with young people in particular wanting to take action to create a better world. This has been strengthened in local communities due to the impact of coronavirus. The opportunity to harness this energy, passion and enthusiasm has never been greater, enabling us to engage all sectors of society in our work.
- The way that people volunteer is changing. Our programmes and volunteer opportunities need to reflect a 'dip-in, dip-out' culture, where quick, short term but highly-engaged volunteering opportunities provide 'stories' for people to tell.
- We need to ensure that we actively engage under represented groups in our volunteering programmes as we establish new recruitment campaigns and volunteer programmes.
- With the 'baby-boom' generation reaching retirement age and the increase in life expectancy we need to consider how we support our own aging volunteer workforce, including looking at new and innovative ways to volunteer and transition to alumni programmes. We will also develop meaningful social engagement for those transitioning into retirement and considering volunteering opportunities with Forestry England which support their health and wellbeing, provide a benefit to society and lifelong learning.

More insight from the volunteer sector tells us that an individual's participation in volunteer activity fluctuates throughout their life. Only 7% of individuals consistently and heavily volunteer over their lifetime.⁵ However there is a growing trend that younger people aged 18-24 are becoming more engaged with volunteer activity. In fact, 70% of those surveyed within this age group had volunteered at some point.⁶ Forestry England's volunteers in this age is only 14%, compared to 60% who are aged over 50.

We will develop our programme of volunteering so districts can pick which programmes best fit their local requirements to support site management while broadening engagement across society.



⁵ Time Well Spent – NCVO - 2019
⁶ Time Well Spent – NCVO - 2019

Family volunteering: 'Roots'

Volunteering is a great time to come together as a family, no matter how young or old you are, to share skills, support your local woodland and have fun!

NCVO's recent research on the volunteer experience suggests that there is an appetite for family volunteering in the UK. This study showed that nearly one in five (18%) of those interested in volunteering said that they would like to give unpaid help together with their family. The figure was 19% among those who have never volunteered suggesting that giving families opportunities to get involved together could be one way to engage different people who haven't volunteered before and an opportunity for organisations to involve more diverse volunteers.⁷

To complement our learning offer, we will look to develop opportunities to engage all family members in volunteering opportunities across the country. This will be delivered through both community outreach programmes and through providing opportunities via our corporate partnership programme.



Youth volunteering

Working in partnership with our learning, funding teams, and external partners we will develop a youth engagement programme to engage under-26s in the nation's forests. Building awareness and knowledge of the Forestry Commission, we will deliver a programme of engaging and exciting learning opportunities which challenge young people to take action to support the nation's forests, concluding with individuals being challenged to engage with a volunteering activity at a forest near them!



⁷ The Links between Family and Volunteering: Jo Stuart Sept 2019

Corporate volunteering: branching out

Corporate volunteering, also known as Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV), has expanded organically across Forestry England over the past 10 or more years, providing local opportunities for organisations to engage with a local site to support in a practical way. This organic growth has, however, resulted in an inconsistent offer to organisations engaging across England.

In the wider volunteer sector, ESV has a low level of uptake across the country according to the Time Well Spent report, with only 10% of volunteers giving time through these types of schemes. Through the life of this strategy we will work in partnership with districts and the Corporate Partnership team to understand our current offer before developing an engaging, sustainable and meaningful corporate volunteering programme. The review will reflect on our current offer, local resource and geographical spread of future opportunities.

We will develop a fair and transparent charging process which will be reinvested in community volunteer programmes, such as family volunteering.



Forestry England supports our employees to participate in volunteering, giving three days a year (pro-rata) for staff to engage in volunteering opportunities for organisations and charities important to them. We will continue to raise awareness of this programme alongside Human Resources to build a culture of ESV to enable more members of our teams to participate in, and understand, the benefits volunteering has not only for the organisation they volunteer for but also for to the personal health and wellbeing of those who volunteer.

Volunteering for today's society: forest communities

The way that people volunteer is changing. Our programmes and volunteer opportunities need to balance a 'dip-in, dip-out' culture, where quick, short-term but highly engaged volunteering opportunities provide 'stories' for people to tell, with those individuals who wish to give regular support to their local site. We must make time to reflect on current opportunities and build new programmes which are fit for the changes we see.

We will support teams to stop, reflect and challenge our offer. We will develop opportunities which are flexible, bite-size, engaging and rewarding to ensure that communities can continue to support the nation's forests in their own way, while also meeting the needs of our sites.

By developing our culture of dip-in-dip-out volunteering, we will support opportunities for family and corporate volunteering to increase volunteers in our currently under-represented age groups (25 to 50) in a way that fits their life.

The expertise and skills held by our volunteers are essential to managing nation's forests. Our volunteers are always keen to share skills both formally and informally to support fellow volunteers and staff to build their own skills and experience. We want to recognise this extensive pool of knowledge which our volunteers hold and look at opportunities to share these skills.

Sustainable support for the nation's forests



Volunteers are essential and passionate advocates for Forestry England whether they work directly with us or via partnership programmes and specialist interest groups. We need to understand the journey an individual or group takes from first meeting Forestry England through to the point of becoming a volunteer to provide positive volunteering opportunities and building strong relationships.



Health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering

Research shows that forests and volunteering have a positive impact on people's health and wellbeing, so bringing both together can only be beneficial! Forest Research has shown that visits to forests can lower blood pressure and pulse rates, and reduce cortisol levels.⁸ Similarly Volunteer Scotland has shown that volunteering is central not just to the health and wellbeing of volunteers, but also to the fostering of healthy and resilient communities, improving mental health, reducing social isolation and loneliness, and enhancing physical health. However, those people who have the greatest health needs and therefore the potential to benefit the most from engaging with volunteering also experience the most barriers to participation. Through the life of this strategy we will:

- Develop a programme to measure and report on the wellbeing benefits experienced by our volunteers.
- Use our knowledge of the wellbeing benefits of volunteering in the nation's forests to promote volunteering: caring for the forest also cares for you!
- Work with teams to identify opportunities and funding streams to remove barriers and increase volunteering from communities with the greatest health needs.

Volunteering, understanding the full benefits

It is important for us to understand our volunteers, their experiences, the impacts their volunteering has on them and what breadth and impact their work has on the nation's forests. We will work alongside specialists across the Forestry Commission to:

- Continue to build our knowledge of the extent of our volunteer programme, to understand levels of engagement, location and work completed by all individuals and groups. We will use external tools such as the Volunteering Impact Assessment alongside our volunteer database to enable us to capture the overall benefits of volunteering across Forestry England.
- Develop a clear understanding of the benefits volunteering can bring for individuals and wider society's health and wellbeing, building on research completed by the Active Forest programme and Forest Research.
- Develop our understanding of the impact volunteers have on supporting the nation's forest. We will take data collected across the country to develop a clear understanding of the natural capital contribution volunteers make through their dedicated support.



⁸ Understanding the contribution of forests to human health and wellbeing, Forest Research 21/06/18



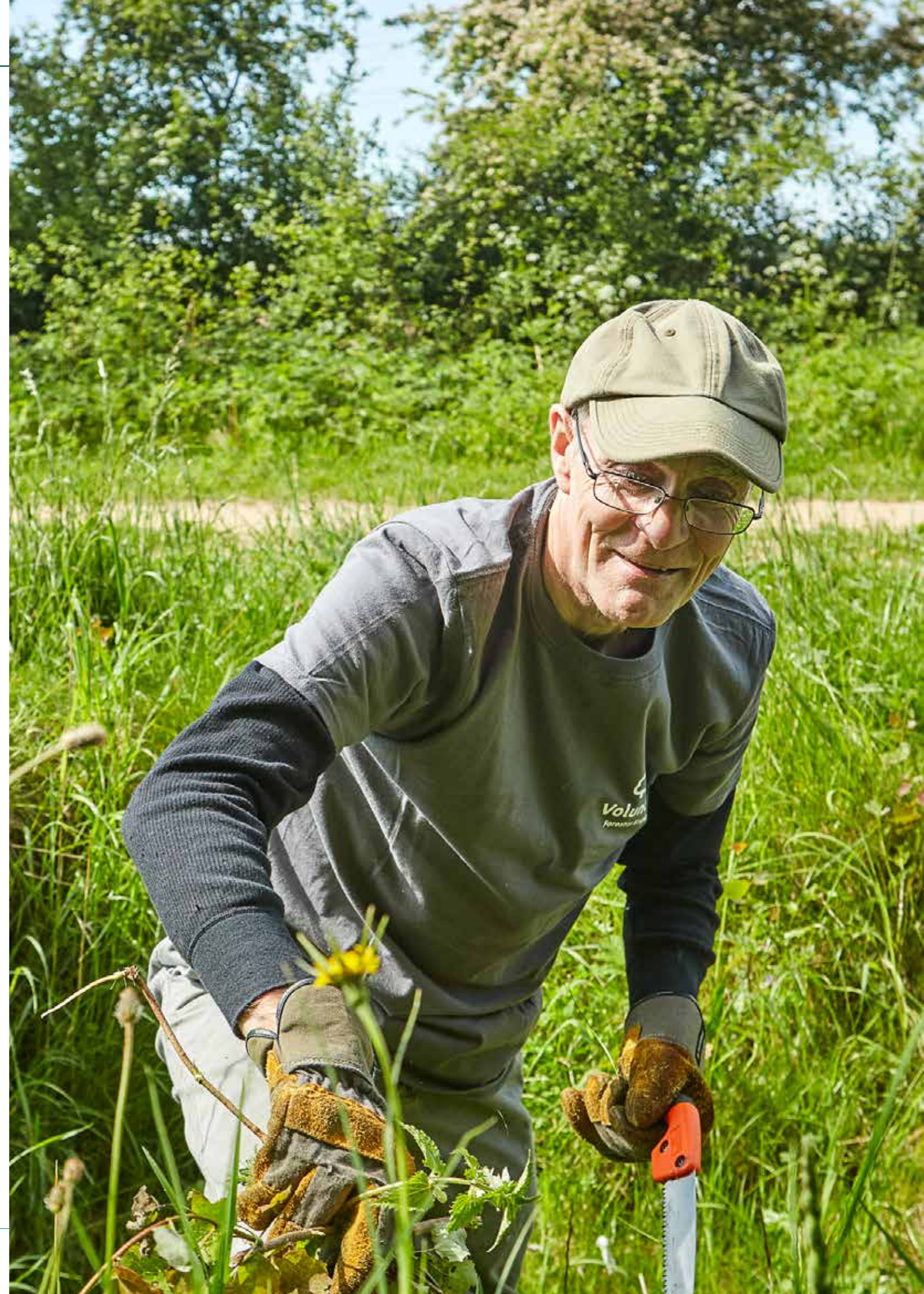
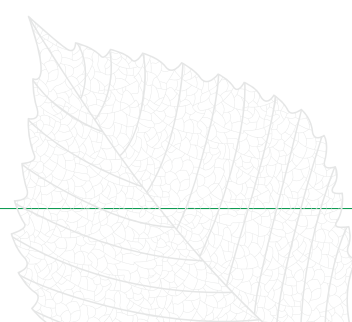
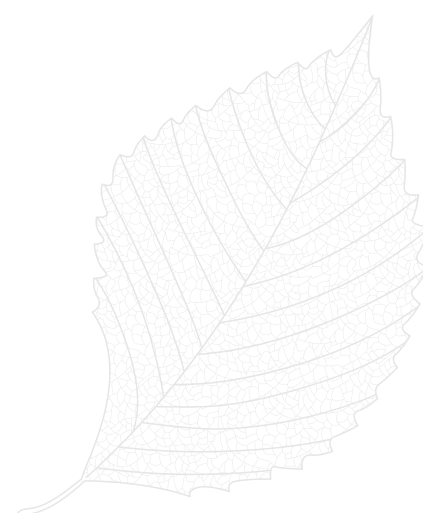
Volunteering and the supporter journey

Working with our volunteers, prospective volunteers and our insights team we will learn more about how, when and why individuals choose to volunteer with us.

We will utilise these learnings to maintain and develop our volunteer support along with enabling volunteers to take the next step along the supporter journey. We will understand how volunteers broaden their support while becoming strong advocates for Forestry England and the sites they love. We will work alongside our volunteers to build appropriately scaled and sensitively managed fundraising campaigns and opportunities for legacy giving.

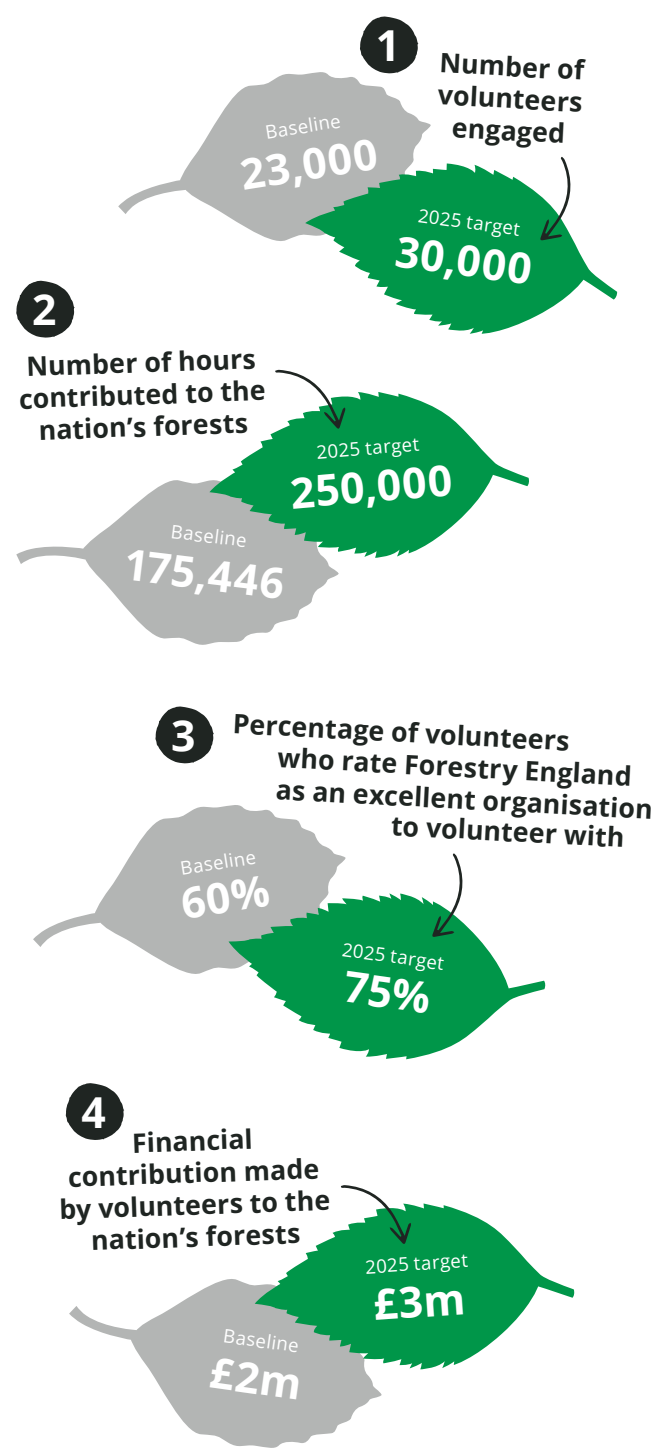
With 60% of our volunteer teams aged over 50 years of age, it is important for us to be considering how we support these individuals during their volunteering but also when they wish to transition to alternative opportunities or are not in a position to continue volunteering.

Therefore, we will work with districts to look at opportunities to best support volunteers across our forest communities. Volunteer Alumni groups, such as the one already developed by Westonbirt Arboretum provide a valued service for individuals who are no longer able to volunteer and to continue to meet with friends in a place they love. Volunteering is not solely about the time given but also the friendships made and the social interaction gained by coming together. We will look at opportunities to support the development of alumni programmes across the country.



Measuring success

Over the life of this strategy we will have four overall measures of success. These will be:



These key performance indicators will be reported on an annual basis to the Forestry England Board and the district teams, excluding KPI 3, which will be reviewed through our national volunteer questionnaire on a bi-annual basis.

Alongside these key performance indicators we will monitor the delivery of all other elements of the strategy with the completion of specific projects plans, which can be found within appendix 1.

The above four measures represent the key indicators we will use to track overall progress with the strategy. In addition, progress with each of the four work programmes that make up the strategy will be also be tracked using the following measures:

- Percentage of volunteers having a superb volunteering experience
- Percentage of volunteers who rate communications with them as good or excellent
- Number of volunteer near misses and accidents
- Percentage of third party volunteers who rate their experience as excellent
- Percentage of volunteers who rate the recognition they receive as a volunteer as good or excellent
- Percentage of volunteers who rate the volunteering portal as good or excellent.

Baseline data for these measures of success will be developed through Q3 and Q4 of 2020/21 and targets for 2025/26 set for the start of 2021/22. The ability to capture and use this data relies on refreshing the volunteer questionnaire and increasing the frequency with which this is distributed to a bi-annual survey.

Programmes of work timeline

	2020/21		2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
	Q3	Q4				
Delivering a superb volunteering experience						
Systems and processes						
Safety at our heart						
Working together with partners and 3rd party groups for a superb forest						
Volunteer communications						
Volunteer recognition						
Building organisational capacity and capability to manage outstanding volunteering						
Volunteer management training and development for our staff						
Training and development for our volunteers						
Forestry England: an outstanding organisation for volunteering						
Succession planning						
Shadow Volunteers						
Volunteering: a habit for life						
Family volunteering – Roots						
Youth volunteering						
Corporate volunteering – branching out						
Volunteering for today's society – Forest Communities						
Sustainable support for the nation's forest						
Health and wellbeing benefits of volunteering						
Volunteering: understanding the full benefits						
Volunteering and the supporter journey						

