

Volunteer and Supporter Group Conferences Summary of Thinking Hats Workshops

Volunteers as supporter of the Trust

The afternoon workshop session at each of the three conferences carried the title "Your experiences of volunteering with the Trust".

The purpose was to facilitate sessions that enabled delegates to:-

- Express how they are feeling about their role and relationship with the Trust
- Share their ideas on how volunteering with the Trust could be improved
- Consider how the Trust might make those improvements, and
- Consider what role volunteers might play in supporting the delivery.

To encourage delegates to express all their views, facilitators used a process based on the Thinking Hats approach. It was designed by Edward de Bono to help groups make sense out of complex situations by restricting participants to think only from one perspective at a time. For our purposes, only four of the six original hats were used.

This document contains a summary of these discussions extracted from all the raw data that has been copied straight from the flip charts produced at each event.

A key piece of learning from this exercise is the huge variety in how volunteers experience their volunteering. Within each of the discussion groups there were volunteers who were very happy with their experience while other volunteers were having a much more difficult experience.

Red hats – the time to release feelings, **emotions** and hunches.

Wearing this hat gave delegates permission to give voice to **how they feel** about volunteering with the Trust without any need for apology, explanation or even to justify their comments

Delegates were asked to answer the question

- 'How do you feel about volunteering with the National Trust?'

406 individual responses were made.

277 have been interpreted as positive (this includes the word challenge)

118 have been interpreted as negative which left

12 comments that could not be safely understood as either positive or negative

Positive emotions:

A huge range of words (including magical and spiritual) were used and recurring themes/ words follow, along with the number of mentions:

Wanted/ valued/ appreciated/ useful/ needed – 21

Belonging/ social – 19

Excited - 11

Motivated - 10

Happy - 9

Stimulated - 9

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Satisfaction - 8
Challenge – 7
Lucky/ privileged – 7
Enjoyment – 7
Educational/ learning – 7
Rewarding - 7

Negative emotions:

Again a huge range of words (unfortunately including rage and hurt) were used and recurring themes/ words follow, along with the number of mentions:

Frustration/ frustrated – 22
Anxious/ worried – 14
Undervalued – 8
Isolated – 6

Yellow hats – the time to be deliberately **optimistic** and as positive as possible about what the Trust does well when involving volunteers.

Delegates were asked to answer the question

- 'What does the National Trust do well when involving volunteers?'

313 individual responses were made. Volunteers tell us we are good at:

Saying thanks and so making volunteers feel valued – 46 mentions. Specific examples included:

- 12 volunteers mentioned the volunteer card and other specific examples including branded clothing, feedback from visitors and good facilities. (Could assume some cross over here with social events)
- Highlighting achievement
- Appreciation and positive comments from visitors

Making volunteering sociable – 37 mentions.

Could add onto this feeling part of a team – 6 mentions. Specific examples included:

- Birthday/opening party
- The volunteer social committee to ensure Tuesday speaks to Wednesday!

Communicating with volunteers – 31 mentions. Specific examples included:

- Provides feedback opportunities
- Joint staff and volunteer meetings
- Use of volunteer working/focus groups
- Meetings/feedback with managers at property
- Explaining decision making
- Informed of local events

Providing opportunities for volunteers to experience new things/ learn new things – 18

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mentions. Specific examples included:

- Keep volunteers involved throughout winter (Tyntesfield, Tintinhull, Hughenden).
- Excellent volunteers library and archive
- Sharing knowledge and friendship across properties
- Refreshing - annual cycle - new items

Providing good training, including induction – 16 mentions. Specific examples included:

- Induction, training at own speed
- The involvement of other volunteers in inductions is particularly helpful.

Employing staff who are supportive of volunteers and volunteering – 14 mentions. Specific examples included:

- Many paid staff have been volunteers
- Trusting volunteers

Being inclusive – 13 mentions

- Having a cross property social group

Supporting volunteers – 10 mentions. Specific examples included:

- Support during sick leave of a volunteer
- Not left alone until feel confident
- Helping volunteers to overcome personal problems
- Flexibility with days/roles

Black hats – the time for cautious, **critical judgement** about the problems, barriers and other negatives that the delegates see when the Trust involves volunteers, based on logic, not emotion.

Delegates were asked to answer the question

- 'What are the problems/barriers/negatives you see in relation to how we involve volunteers?'

It is interesting to note that a number of facilitators commented that they had to work hard to get responses to this question from delegates.

258 individual responses were made.

Volunteers tell us we need to improve in the following areas:

Communicating (property, regional, national level all mentioned) - 48 mentions.

Specific examples included:

- I've learnt that so much more is available for me than my property is giving me access to.
- We are not asked for our opinions

Inducting and training – 23 mentions. Specific examples included:

- Training can be lacking, late, unfocussed.

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Need more practical guidance/training, technical skills especially, for conservation and supervising filming/weddings and sub-contractors.

- Inconsistency of Induction and Training - (for some)

Decision making processes/ bureaucracy – 17 mentions plus 4 additional 'Health & Safety gone mad' mentions. Specific examples included:

- Health and Safety!! Hard hats to pick apples/paper work
- Decision making process - 4 months for lime water mix
- Things take too long to action, takes too long to get permission for projects

Staff time and skills to manage volunteers – 13 mentions. Specific examples included:

- Management are too busy
- Lack of experience of 'bright young things' staff

Support and management not provided – 13

- No tracking. No objectives set if wanted – no follow up on registration form.
- Not enough volunteers appraisal

Utilising to the full volunteers skills and experiences – 12 mentions linked with an additional 5 mentions of staff not trusting volunteers. Specific examples included:

- Experience and contributions devalued or ignored e.g. research by volunteers ignored or never used
- Full potential of certain volunteer roles not maximised
- Volunteers not given independence or freedom to organise themselves
- Patronising attitude: not trusting volunteer to do it or volunteer to volunteer situation

Green hats – the time for **creative thinking** to generate weird and wonderful new ideas and possibilities about how the experiences of volunteering with the Trust might be improved.

Delegates were asked to

- 'Come up with some specific ideas, no matter how weird or wonderful, to improve the experience of volunteering with us'.

255 individual responses were made. In general much of this session re-iterates the yellow and black hat session e.g. people saying 'more training' rather than proposing creative ideas on how we can deliver more training.

Recurring themes with some specific ideas included:

Better communications – 33 mentions with an additional 18 mentions specifically talking about electronic versions of communications

- Strategy → monthly newsletter from centre, email or sent.
- Team briefings (volunteers invited to)
- Computer access at facility for volunteers – access to intranet.
- Enclose other information with payment advice slips

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More/ better formal training and more opportunities for informal learning – 28 mentions

- International trips and exchanges!
- Specific interest training groups (Regional or National)
- Regional/cluster visits of volunteers to meet and mingle with other volunteers.
- Property DVD/CD guide for new volunteers
- Encyclopaedia of volunteer knowledge – at each property – book/computer for volunteers to record their knowledge.
- A travelling mentor

Better utilisation of volunteers skills/ experience – 27 mentions; includes 10 specific mentions of a skills audit and or skills database.

- Property CLV plans should be implemented by volunteers.
- A pool of volunteers – cross area rather than tied to a property
- A 'do you have skills that we could use' comment box

Methods of acknowledging/ thanking volunteers – 17

Points system for volunteer hours – for non monetary reward (e.g. accommodation at AGM)

- 'Hug a volunteer' week (by agreement, of course!)
- Celebrate our volunteers more to the outside world

Volunteers involved in staff meetings/ decision making processes – 11 mentions

- Open invitation (or representative) to attend staff and other meetings

Need to diversify the volunteer base – 11 mentions

- Head hunting volunteers
- Sharing volunteers between other eco groups etc.
- Family volunteering

Uniforms/ clothing for volunteers – 6 mentions

Other miscellaneous ideas:

- All management staff to do 'back to the floor' volunteering regularly including working holidays
- Arrangements for volunteer 'mystery visits' for peer evaluation
- Use Saga magazine; NT to contribute a monthly column
- Transport to properties – car clubs/pool; volunteer drivers
- Task force to help properties with problems