

# Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers

16

## An ACoRP Briefing Sheet

### The value of volunteers to community rail

Whether they are working at stations tending gardens or carrying out support tasks such as distributing guides and linking with schools and other organisations to add value to community rail projects, we all know volunteers can prove to be worth their weight in gold.

Their support is especially useful to the often lone, often part-time CRP Officer role. They can support your marketing activities, and those who help maintain station gardens help reduce anti-social behaviour, with the knock-on effect of cutting station maintenance costs and encouraging use of the service.

All very positive outcomes that can easily be achieved on any route if you treat volunteer recruitment and retention as a project in its own right.

Importantly you need commitment to volunteering from all partners, most especially from the TOC; because working with volunteers should be a mutually beneficial relationship.

Generally the TOC should have its own guide to volunteering/station adoption, so you will have the benefit of this framework already set up to use in terms of approved tasks and rules and regulations for volunteers when working at stations. As CRP Officer with local knowledge of the route, you're not only well placed to see where volunteers can add value along the route, but also to lead on actively recruiting new volunteers and working with them on a regular basis.



### Before and After - Volunteer Contribution at Blythe Bridge



*These two images show a section of the garden at Blythe Bridge in its overgrown state before and then after it was cleared and planted by the station volunteer team*

## Methods of Recruitment

So what's the magic answer to recruiting volunteers?

Unfortunately there isn't one single method that will get good people on board because different people respond in different ways. Therefore the best suggestion is to try a number of ways, such as:

- Posters and leaflets – likely outlets apart from at stations are:  
Schools and colleges -  
Libraries - Town Halls  
GP/Dental Surgeries -  
Religious centres - Sports and leisure centres - Cafes/public houses - Shop windows - Job Centres;
- Free editorial or free/paid advertising slots in local media including radio, newspapers and parish/town council newsletters – as part of the editorial, feature photos of and quotes from current volunteers, telling the story of what they do and why they do it; there is no better way of selling the job than with a positive message from those who already enjoy doing it;
- Exhibitions;
- Talks/presentations to targeted groups, for example, youth clubs, 50+ Forum – another opportunity here to invite current volunteers to tell people about the benefits of what they do and why they enjoy it;
- Special volunteer recruitment event/campaign – if you decide to use this method, consider the timing of the event. January (New Year's Resolutions to lose weight, keep fit etc.), September (after the main holiday season) and during Volunteers Week (June) are probably the best times for a recruitment drive;
- Word of mouth / speak to existing volunteers – many volunteers are recruited through those that already do the job. There is nobody better placed to sell the benefits of what they do; they are also well placed to know who will fit within the team and/or who has the right skills. Their knowledge of the area also means they can advise on where locally it is good to advertise etc.;

- Internet;
- Register with your local volunteer centre;
- Through you – in your day to day role as a CRP Officer, there are always opportunities to sell volunteering to potential new recruits. For example, just by working at a station with volunteers provides a great shop window to advertise who you are and show what your volunteers do. When selling the role, highlight your volunteers' achievements, because people love signing up to a winning team.

### The message

Whatever method(s) you use, give a clear, simple message of what are the main skills needed and the sort of tasks people will be required to do as a volunteer. Also try to give an estimated time commitment. Then anyone joining your volunteer team has a clear idea from the start of what is expected, is more likely to stay as a volunteer and less likely to feel 'put upon'.

### Motivation

People have many different reasons for volunteering; they might want to use volunteering to meet people, to learn new skills or as an outlet for existing skills, or just to keep active. Volunteering at a station could fulfil many or all of these needs, so remember what motivates people to join and use this in your recruitment message.

Ensure anyone joining gets the opportunity to meet all members of the station volunteer team and volunteers from other stations so they feel part of a wider team and can easily link up as necessary to work on individual projects.



*The station volunteers at Tutbury & Hatton station maintain and replant these hayrack planters throughout the seasons*

## Retaining your volunteers

Once you've got them, it's even more important to keep them. The knowledge, skills and expertise of your volunteers is of great value and retaining their support ensures continuity in CRP projects and station enhancements. So be prepared to put in a lot of time from the start with all your volunteers.

### Supervision and support

- Try to make it easy for volunteers to volunteer and stay in the role. As their day to day, probably first point of contact, they will look to you as their role coordinator for advice and support, so that's what you need to be.
- Ensure also they have the contact details of everyone relevant to the role and the Duty Manager contact at the TOC in case of something urgent. This is especially important for volunteers working at stations, who mostly work alone without direct supervision from the CRP or the TOC.
- Make sure they know the policy on requesting resources and how to claim for any out of pocket expenses. Ideally the CRP/TOC should provide the volunteers with everything they need to do the job, from plants and compost to litterpickers.

- Keep in touch with them on a regular basis. Treat them as your priority; help them out in their duties whenever you can and always get back to them.
- Make sure the role is interesting, challenging and rewarding for everyone, but match tasks to what people are interested in and also feel capable of fulfilling. It goes without saying that volunteers should be involved in as many of your projects as possible; that is what community rail is all about.
- Give current volunteers the chance to share learning and good practice by offering them the chance to mentor new recruits. This also shows the trust you have in them to support the team.
- At the very least, try to ensure that volunteers have fun doing what they do and enjoy the experience; this is one of the primary ways of keeping them in the role and also encouraging others to join.

### Recognition and rewards

As a CRP Officer, if you work with volunteers try to treat them as a priority in your day to day job. They can more than add value to your role, for example, projects like station gardens only have real impact because of the volunteers who consistently maintain the area and keep up the standard.

- Take the time to get to know them as people. Show an interest in their outside life. Taking time out to have a chat with them is a small price to pay for their involvement.
- Give them the opportunity to participate in decision-making, ask for and use their ideas and when possible, give them the chance to take the lead on individual projects. It will really help them feel their work is important and encourage them to expand their remit. For example, at Blythe Bridge station, the schoolchildren's artwork on display is purely down to the efforts of one of the volunteer team, who used their initiative to work with staff at the local primary school and make this project happen.
- Hold regular events, such as a Station Community Day, when all volunteers come together to work as a team, supported by the TOC and local community groups, to roll out a number of small improvement projects at the station. Such events are proven to provide a real sense of satisfaction for all involved and build team spirit.



*This display by the CRP at Alsager station serves two purposes – it gives recognition to the current station volunteers and so supports retention, and has also encouraged more volunteers to join the group*

- If your TOC doesn't have an annual meeting for all volunteers, encourage them to do so. East Midlands Trains, for example, invites all volunteers to such an event, hosted by the Commercial Director and Head of Stations. It's an opportunity for the volunteers to meet their counterparts from other routes, ask questions and share ideas and receive a genuine pat on the back from the TOC and the CRP.
- Volunteers should also be on the guest list at other events such as Best Stations Awards to recognise their part in creating prize-winning stations. Projects by volunteers at Alsager, Blythe Bridge and Kidsgrove stations have played a huge part in each of these stations winning awards.
- Promote your volunteers' achievements. Create a photo display at the station; write up their endeavours in your annual report or other CRP publication; involve them in press releases and press photocalls; nominate them for awards, Volunteer of the Year etc.
- Importantly, take the time to say thank you for what they do; just this can go a long way to help people feel that their contribution is really valued.

## In Conclusion

On the North Staffordshire Line we now have a total of 36 volunteers supporting the route; all have been recruited through the CRP to become members of the TOC's (East Midlands Trains) station volunteer scheme. The longest serving have been members for many years. Here are a few soundbites from some of the North Staffs. Volunteer team about why they volunteer....

"Being a station volunteer is a winner all round for me; I cycle there and back which helps keep me fit, then whilst working at the station with my fellow volunteers we have a laugh and a chat and always end the day feeling we have done something useful" – Marion, Alsager

"The satisfaction and the results you can achieve as a team are rewards in themselves, but when our work on the station gardens contributed to our station winning Best Small Station, we felt on top of the world" – Chris, Blythe Bridge

"I volunteer because I love gardening; it has also helped me find a whole new group of friends" – Carol, Kidsgrove

"I volunteered because I want the station to be a welcoming place for local people and visitors to the town" – Janet, Uttoxeter



*A small section of the pretty station gardens at Kidsgrove, purely the result of hard work by station volunteers*

## JULY - SEPTEMBER

### *Award for Kidsgrove station gardeners*

*In July, the Britain in Bloom judges called in to view the Kidsgrove station gardens ... and they've awarded the hard-working gardeners a prize! At the time of going to press, the colour of the medal is unknown (TBA in October) but the garden is in the mix for Best Community Garden. For a huge garden that was until recently just an overgrown mass of weeds, that's a massive tribute to the talented volunteer gardeners at Kidsgrove.*



Part of Kidsgrove station gardens

### *Best Stations Awards*

*And the tributes don't end there! Kidsgrove station took East Midlands Trains' Best Stations Awards 2011 by storm, beating off stiff opposition to get to the final in two categories - Best Community Station, where Kidsgrove was Runner Up to Market Rasen, and Best Small Station, which Kidsgrove won!*

*Everyone involved in working with the Partnership to care for the station, from volunteers and supporters like Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, to local schools and East Midlands Trains' staff, has contributed to Kidsgrove winning these awards.*

*As for Blythe Bridge, winner of the 2010 Best Small Station Award, the continuing improvement work at this station by the Partnership, community and very able team of volunteers was rewarded with Runner Up in the 2011 Best Small Station category.*

*For the Partnership, our special prize is that both finalists in the Best Small Station category hailed from the Crewe-Stoke-Derby route; what a tribute that is to the hard work of all North Staffordshire Line volunteers.*

### *Community art enhances Uttoxeter*

*Passengers using Uttoxeter station can now enjoy a stunning 120' long mural, which borders Platform 1. Designed and created by professional artist Anthony Hammond, it celebrates the history and character of the Staffordshire Town. From Uttoxeter people to landmarks and businesses, the mural design cleverly features them all, entwined around the words 'Welcome to Uttoxeter'.*

*Local businesses including Alton Towers Resort, JCB and Uttoxeter Racecourse, together with the Town Council, all contributed to making the project happen, and the Association of Community Rail Partnerships chipped in with an award from their Small Grants Fund. A lasting tribute to the town and a great welcome message for passengers.*



*Kidsgrove station also shortlisted in Station Development category in 2011 Community Rail Awards*

*Pictured are (from left to right) Blythe Bridge volunteer stalwarts Sarah and Graham with Kidsgrove volunteer Jan, Faye Lambert of the Partnership, and Kidsgrove volunteer Elsie proudly showing off the stations' awards, which were presented by David Horne of East Midlands Trains (far right).*



*Artist Anthony Hammond showing Project Officer Faye Lambert his work of art*

*Giving volunteers recognition and showing appreciation for their work helps keep them on board*

Text by Faye Lambert

## Contact Details

Faye Lambert, North Staffordshire CRP,  
Telephone 01782 232272

## © Association of Community Rail Partnerships

Rail & River Centre,  
Canal Side,  
Slaithwaite Civic Hall,  
New Street,  
Slaithwaite,  
Huddersfield HD7 5AB