

Committee(s): Natural Environment Board	Dated: 17 October 2024
Subject: Volunteering Audit	Public
Which outcomes in the City Corporation's Corporate Plan does this proposal aim to impact directly?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Diverse Engaged Communities</i> • <i>Leading Sustainable Development</i> • <i>Providing Excellent Services</i> • <i>Flourishing Public Spaces</i>
Does this proposal require extra revenue and/or capital spending?	N
If so, how much?	N/A
What is the source of Funding?	N/A
Has this Funding Source been agreed with the Chamberlain's Department?	N/A
Report of: Katie Stewart, Executive Director of Environment	For Information
Report author: Abigail Tinkler, Head of Learning, Natural Environment Division	

Summary

This report describes volunteering across the Natural Environment Division and City Gardens, providing an overview of the scale of volunteering activities, highlighting achievements and areas needing improvement. In the fiscal year 2023/24, approximately 50,000 volunteer hours were recorded, underscoring the substantial community involvement in conservation, wildlife monitoring, and public engagement activities across our open spaces. Despite this strong engagement and dedicated staff efforts, several challenges were identified, including the lack of centralised policies, inconsistent training, and resource constraints.

It is proposed to explore further, at the Natural Environment Board Away Day, the role of volunteering within Natural Environment Division and City Gardens and to help shape recommendations on its future management. These will be presented for approval in a subsequent report to Members.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

Main Report

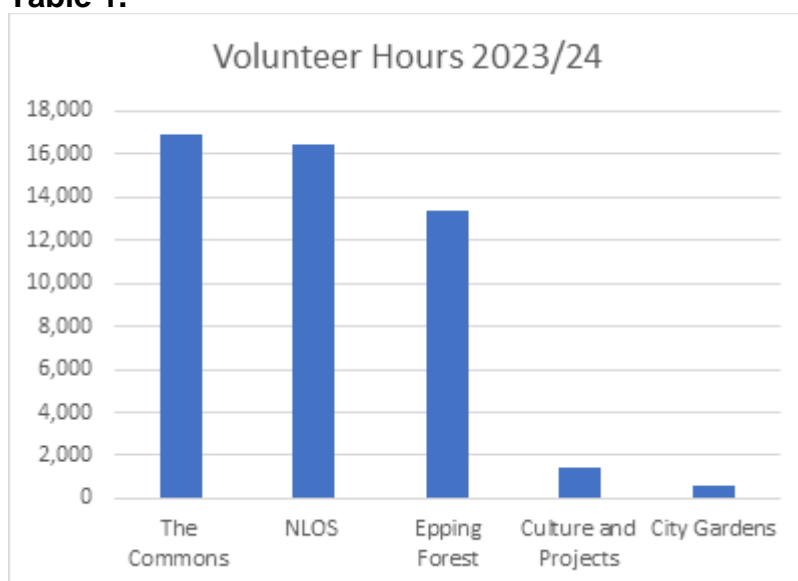
Background

1. Volunteers are integral to the success of the Natural Environment Division and City Gardens. This report analyses current volunteer activities and identifies key issues relating to volunteer management and support.

Current Position

2. In 2023/24, volunteers contributed nearly 50,000 hours, equivalent to approximately 1,394 full-time (35-hour) work weeks. This substantial commitment reflects the widespread involvement and dedication of volunteers across various sites.
3. The distribution of volunteer hours across the Natural Environment Division and City Gardens is shown in Table 1 below. An overview of volunteering activities is provided in Appendix 1.

Table 1.



Volunteer Audit

4. Several interviews were conducted with front line staff who work closely with volunteers in our open spaces. The feedback received demonstrated that staff members are dedicated to engaging volunteers, recognising volunteers' role as advocates and as crucial contributors to the sites. Staff also reported that they listen and respond to volunteer interests and needs.
5. Staff invest time in supporting and training volunteers, who learn important transferable skills such as gardening, conservation, wildlife identification, learning facilitation and visitor engagement. However, there is no formalised training on topics that may be relevant across the sites, such as understanding the role of

the Natural Environment Division and the role volunteering plays in delivering shared goals.

6. There is a mixed model of volunteering management. Some sites and teams (The Commons, Learning Team) utilise Corporation staff to manage volunteers, and other sites support external volunteer groups. Corporation staff invest time and expertise in working with external volunteer groups, for example planning, co-ordinating and providing experienced staff to support some sessions such as conservation work. External volunteer groups are listed below:
 - a. West Ham Park: Friends of West Ham Park.
 - b. Hampstead Heath: Heath Hands, Heath and Hampstead Society.
 - c. Highgate Wood: Heath Hands, Good Gym.
 - d. Epping Forest: Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers, Epping Forest Conservation Volunteers, Epping Forest Heritage Trust, Epping Forest Riders' Association, Friends of Wanstead Parklands, Friends of Wintry Wood, Highams Park Snedders, The Wren Wildlife and Conservation Group, Friends of Swains Green.
 - e. City Gardens: Friends of City Gardens, Barbican Wildlife Group, The Aldgate Gardening Club, Middlesex Street Estate Community Gardeners, and the Biodiversity Partnership Group.
 - f. Keats House: Keats Community Library, Heath Hands.
7. Volunteer hours are captured by these groups and included within the hours reported for each section. The largest external volunteering group is Heath Hands, which contributed 15,000 volunteer hours last year and has a City of London staff member seconded to manage the programme.
8. Appendix 2 'Report on Volunteering at Epping Forest' provides insight into a range of external volunteering groups.
9. There is an on-going challenge of balancing high volumes of volunteer requests with available staff resources to accommodate these requests.
10. A range of departmental policy and guidance documents were created between 2016 – 2021, when the Open Spaces Department had a 0.5fte staff member dedicated to volunteering across the department, reinforced, from 2019 onwards, by a pan-Corporation resource in the shape of the Corporate Volunteering Manager. A shared vision for volunteering was created within the Division, which highlighted how volunteering benefits both the volunteers and the organisation. See Appendix 3 'Open Spaces Vision for Volunteering' for information on previous policies and guidance. Whilst there has been an absence of up-to-date policy and procedure on volunteering for the Natural Environment Division and City Gardens, however, there is now an opportunity to implement the Corporation's 'Guidance for Managing External Volunteers' which was approved by the Corporation's SLT in summer 2023.
11. For staff managing volunteers, there has been an absence of centralised training and support, but this gap is being picked up through the recent recruitment of a Corporation-wide volunteering manager. Previously, staff training in volunteer

management was provided by a 0.5 fte role within the Open Spaces Department.

12. There is a lack of a straightforward method for reimbursing volunteer expenses (e.g., travel and refreshments) and limited recognition methods.
13. Corporate volunteering is managed differently across sites, with some managed by external groups and others by staff. At Hampstead Heath, City Gardens and Epping Forest, corporate volunteering is managed by external volunteer groups and the associated income is retained by these groups. For example, Heath Hands gained £42,000 income from corporate volunteering in 2023/24. At Epping Forest, staff are investigating opportunities to lead corporate volunteering sessions internally. At West Ham Park and The Commons, corporate volunteering sessions are led by Corporation staff. The levels of charging for corporate groups are currently decided at site level. For more information on the management of volunteering at site level, please see Appendix 4 'Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Volunteering Report'.
14. There is a demand for corporate volunteering which requires staff time to manage. The City Gardens Team has recently recruited an apprentice to help meet this demand. Corporate volunteering in City Gardens sites was previously overseen by The Friends of City Gardens and supported by City Gardens team. This is now transferring back to City Gardens who have recently recruited an apprentice to develop a corporate volunteering programme, and the employment of a Gardener (Volunteer Facilitator). City Gardens are also looking at how they can work with external providers to improve the offer to corporate volunteers. Recently they have been working with "Leaves Breath" who have facilitated two events. It is planned to trial a longer partnership with them and explore how this type of relationship can be developed.
15. A Volunteering Manager is in post in the corporate Learning and Organisational Development Team to support volunteer initiatives across the Corporation. Key responsibilities include:
 - a. Managing LEAP – the Corporation's Employee Volunteering Programme, which promotes and supports Corporation staff volunteering including within the NE Division and City Gardens.
 - b. Collaborating with External Volunteer Departments, which includes working with staff who manage volunteers across the Corporation, including those in the Division, to ensure consistency of processes, develop tools and training, and share best practice around volunteer recruitment, management and recognition.
 - c. With the support of the 'Volunteer Ways of Working Group', implement the Corporation's "Guidance for Managing External Volunteers" signed off by the Corporation's SLT in Summer 2023.

Options

16. Options for alternative way of managing volunteers across Natural Environment Division and City Gardens will be presented for discussion with Members at the Natural Environment Board Away Day to seek their views informally.

Proposals

17. Proposals for the future management of volunteers within Natural Environment Division and City Gardens will be developed in conjunction with Members at the Natural Environment Board Away Day and presented to Members for their approval at a subsequent meeting.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

Strategic implications: Volunteers working in our open spaces make a valuable contribution to our strategic aims and support our charitable objects. An updated policy on volunteering has been identified as a current gap.

Financial implications: Volunteer hours equated to 1,394 full-time (35-hour) work weeks in 2023/24, however, staff time is required to effectively manage our volunteers. For corporate volunteers, fees and charges are in place; these are decided on a site-by-site basis.

Resource implications: Volunteers provide a valuable resource to support the range of activities listed in Appendix 1.

Legal implications: Volunteers are not protected in law in the same way as employees. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) has information on volunteers' legal status.

Risk implications: No significant risks, but a lack of a consistent approach to volunteer management may result in variable standards and poor engagement with volunteers, with a possible outcome being a reduction in our respective volunteer pool and/or a reputational impact on the Corporation.

Equalities implications: The management and recruitment of volunteers is undertaken in compliance with our Public Sector Equality Duty 2010.

Climate implications: Volunteers working in our open spaces make a valuable contribution to delivering our climate actions.

Security implications: None

Conclusion

18. The Natural Environment Division and City Gardens benefit greatly from volunteer support, with nearly 50,000 hours recorded in 2023/24 covering a range of activities. Several challenges in relation to volunteering are identified, relating to volunteering policy, management, training and support. It is proposed to explore further at the Natural Environment Board Away Day, the role of volunteering within Natural Environment Division and City Gardens, to help shape recommendations on its future management. This will be presented for approval in a subsequent report to Members.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Overview of volunteering activities
Appendix 2: Report on Volunteering at Epping Forest
Appendix 3: Open Spaces Vision for Volunteering and list of policies and guidance.
Appendix 4: Burnham Beeches and Stoke Common Volunteering Report

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