

Committee(s):	Date(s):	Item no.
Open Spaces and City Gardens Committee	10 June 2013	
Subject: Annual review of volunteering working in the Open Spaces 2012/13	Public	
Report of: Director of Open Spaces	For Information	
<u>Summary</u>		
<p>Volunteering continues to provide an excellent way to engage local communities with our Open Spaces. This year the Volunteer Improvement Group has focused on improving the quality of volunteers' experience through the development of local volunteer improvement plans. The year has seen the development of new volunteering opportunities, the creation of a more highly skilled volunteer workforce and a significant contribution made by volunteers in conservation, education and events work in our Open Spaces.</p>		
Recommendation		
<p>That this report is received and the work carried out by volunteers across all of the City's Open Spaces is commended.</p>		

Main Report

1. Background

1.1 Volunteers play an important role in many areas of work in City of London Open Spaces. The Volunteer Strategy is now thoroughly embedded and all sites, other than the Cemetery and Crematorium, have well-developed volunteering schemes and opportunities.

1.2 The Volunteering Improvement Group, which consists of representatives of all sites, works to improve the quality of volunteering opportunities and involve volunteers in all aspects of the management of the Open Space sites.

2. Current Position

2.1 In 2012/13 the Volunteering Improvement Group focused on ensuring delivery of the strategy through divisional ‘health checks’ against the strategy. Existing volunteers were surveyed for their views on progress being made on developing volunteering and, using the results, each division produced an improvement plan.

2.2 The department has continued to draw on sources of expertise in volunteering, for example subscribing to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, which provides a range of supporting resources.

2.3 Although the aggregate number of volunteer hours fell in 2012/13 compared to 2011/12 many new opportunities for volunteers were created and sites focused on improving the quality of volunteers’ experiences, through recognition of achievements, training opportunities and increased involvement in the management of sites.

2.4 Having regard to Members’ comments on last year’s report, this report describes volunteering work thematically, rather than detailing activities by site.

3. Measuring volunteering

3.1 Overall a 1% decrease in volunteer hours was reported. Decreases were recorded at all sites apart from Epping Forest, where hours contributed rose 8%.

3.2 Superintendents reported that some volunteers reduced their levels of engagements as they were LOCOG volunteers during the Olympics. It was also felt that recruitment was more difficult due to the proliferation of volunteering roles associated with the organisation of the Olympics.

Table One: Total hours volunteered at Open Spaces sites 2011/12 and 2012/13

Site	2011/12	2012/13
City Commons	11,240	10,770
City Gardens	1213	1127
West Ham Park	1574	1518
North London Open Spaces	6459	5182
Burnham Beeches	6200	5092
Epping Forest	19,536	21,730
Total	46,055	45,419 (-1%)

4. Volunteers' contribution to conservation work

4.1 Volunteers continued to provide a key role in carrying out fieldwork, particularly surveys. This work has been vital to conservation projects at all sites.

4.2 At City Commons a team of tree wardens were trained to carry out surveys for signs of ash dieback. Surveying and monitoring volunteers have also increased their work to cover butterflies, moths, reptiles, small mammals and birds.

4.3 Burnham Beeches have also increased conservation volunteering, with a regular Thursday volunteer group being supplemented by a Tuesday group which works specifically to support ecological monitoring and the work of the Conservation Officer. At Stoke Common three hectares of heathland were restored with help from young volunteers recruited from the local area. This reflects an increase in younger volunteers at Burnham Beeches.

4.4 At City Gardens corporate volunteers continued to play an important role, with members of staff from Lloyds and Goodman and Mason volunteering at Bunhill Fields doing wild flower and whip (small tree) planting, as well as creating a bug hotel and a willow fence. The Fann Street meadow was scythed by volunteers led by a tutor, and mini orchards were created at Fann Street, Golden Lane and on the Barbican Estate.

4.5 Once again volunteers completed the annual nest box check in the City Gardens. In total 48 bird boxes were checked with 29% of boxes having been nested in during the 2012 nesting season.

4.6 Significant conservation volunteering was carried out at Epping Forest as part of the Scout Project 2012. Scouts undertook a total of four projects including conservation work clearing silver birch, holly and gorse and clearing reeds from Bulrush Pond.

4.7 On-going conservation work at Epping Forest included work with the Forest Keepers in the south of the Forest to clear a public footpath at Bush work and remove scrub associated with anti-social behaviour at Jubilee Pond with the Lake house Lake Project. The Lakes and Ponds Task Force at Epping Forest focused their efforts on Connaught Water, completing the disabled angling swim platforms and planting margin and aquatic plants.

5 Volunteers' contribution to education and events

5.1 Volunteers have been involved in many activities which involve educating or explaining the Open Spaces.

5.2 City Commons participated in The Big Challenge, a project that brings young people from diverse backgrounds together to learn new skills, make new friends and volunteer to benefit their community. The Surrey group spent their final weekend this year helping remove silver birch to widen firebreaks on Ashted Common. Forty-three young people came with a team of mentors which provided an excellent set up for supervising the extensive amount of work achieved. City Commons plans to participant again this year.

5.3 At Hampstead Heath a three year project is underway called "Wild about Hampstead Heath" to support local people to explore Hampstead Heath and discover its wildlife. As part of this project fifty volunteers have been recruited and are being support to train and gain qualifications. Work is focusing on ensuring volunteers from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities are encouraged to join the scheme

5.4 At Burnham Beeches volunteers played a key role in a number of one off events such as the Jubilee celebrations and a visit by Skewbald Theatre.

5.5 The Friends of West Ham Park have also organised a number of events in West Ham Park through the year, including assisting in building and hosting "Newham's Biggest Leaf Pile", the 'Park in the Dark' event and a *Heroes and Heroines* event funded by a grant from the London Borough of Newham.

5.6 Educational activities in West Ham Park have continued, with the Food Growing project in its fifth year. Seven gardening club session were held in the new Jubilee Food Garden, providing an excellent way for local schools and young people to become involved in volunteering in the park. The Park and Nursery also hosted five work placement students from local schools and Capel Manor College.

6 Ensuring the quality of volunteers' experience

6.1 Work has focused, as a result of local improvement plans, on ensuring the highest possible quality of experience for volunteers. This is achieved through encouraging volunteers in management and improvement of the site, ensuring appropriate training is offers and recognising the achievement of volunteers.

6.2 Volunteers sit on consultative committees which allow for their input into the management of sites.

6.3 At City Commons work has been done to develop the team leader role. Team leaders are offered training, including first aid, and now regularly assist rangers in leading tasks. At Epping Forest and Burnham Beeches staff and volunteers attend joint training in areas such as chainsaw use, surveying visitors and leading health walks. Epping Forest has also developed a two monthly induction programme for volunteers.

6.4 Sites actively communicate with volunteers and run a range of events to celebrate the achievements of volunteers. At Burnham Beeches volunteers were invited to participate in the visit of the Lord Mayor and the Dorneywood event. At Epping Forest the Volunteer Awards Party has continued to provide an opportunity to recognise the work of exceptional volunteers.

6.5 At Hampstead Heath the development of a new base for volunteers at Parliament Hill Fields has provided a focal point for volunteers on the heath.

7 Corporate and strategic implications

7.1 Promoting and supporting volunteering fulfils the aim of the City Together Strategy to build a strong third sector to meet the needs of our communities.

7.2 Volunteering also supports the departmental Business Plan, with volunteers aiding in delivery of many aims and objectives, for example providing safe, secure and accessible Open Spaces and services for the benefit of London and the Nation.

7.3 More specifically the Business Plan includes a specific aim for the department of “[involving] communities and partners in developing a sense of place through the care and management of our sites.”

8 Conclusion

8.1 The introduction of a Volunteer Strategy and the oversight of the Volunteer Improvement Group have provided impetus to developing volunteer opportunities and fully engaging volunteers in the management of City of London Open Spaces.

8.2 The Open Space sites have benefited hugely from well-established volunteer groups and schemes and the development of new initiatives. Volunteers can bring a unique and valuable perspective to managing our Open Spaces and work

will continue to maximise the benefit the sites receive from volunteers and the benefit the experiences bring to volunteers.

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