



**Volunteering Enabling
Plan 2023-2026
Summary**



INTRODUCTION

Our 5 Year Strategy, Connecting Communities for Change, sets out our purpose to engage more people – in more ways – with the natural world, in order to inspire them to address climate change, biodiversity loss and wellbeing issues with the power of natural green spaces.

These ambitious plans are only achievable with the support, and growth, of our loyal community of changemakers. Our volunteers are an invaluable part of this Earth Trust community, engaged in a wide range of activities that underpin our work.

In order to achieve our vision we want to build and connect a wider volunteer community, diversifying our volunteer network and supporting more people to join us, so that together we can champion accessible natural green spaces where nature and people thrive in balance.

This plan aims to bring clarity to our aspirations to grow our volunteer community to support our strategy, and sets out how we will achieve it.

We have analysed the volunteering activities currently in place across Earth Trust in 2023, and using feedback from our volunteers, together with external reference points, we have sought to understand the strengths of our existing programme and seek out opportunities to evolve, improve and grow volunteering over the next three years.

This document summary:

- Sets the context of where we are today
- Identifies strategic and operational priorities from now until 2026
- Provides a roadmap for the development of the volunteer programme

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Strategic overview

Earth Trust's past, present and future is due to the hard work, love, determination and care that volunteers have for the green spaces we manage.

In addition to a passion for natural green spaces, our volunteers are motivated to join us for a myriad of reasons. To learn new skills or gain work experience, for the social benefits of making new friends and connecting with others, to improve their physical health or mental wellbeing. Or simply to give something back or be out in nature.

Volunteers bring a range of motivations, skills and experiences to Earth Trust. They have a direct impact on our ability to progress with time, talent and energy that help us to do more every day, and grow our ambition for what is possible.

Where are we today

We offer 12 different volunteering roles providing outdoor, indoor and public facing opportunities to support our work. Each requires varying levels of skill, experience and training and they range from being ad hoc and flexible to regular commitments and remote options.

Volunteer Role	Format	Number of Active Volunteers (Feb-23)
Land Management	Weekly	70
Hedgelayers	Seasonal	13
Education Support	Weekly	5
Event	Ad hoc	Varies
Office	Weekly	5
Ambassador	Seasonal	8
Community Wardens	Regular	25
Gardeners	Weekly	12
Maintenance	Weekly	6
Wildlife Surveyors	Seasonal	15
Research	Project based	Varies
Walks, Talks & Tour Guides	Regular	Varies
Total Active Volunteers¹		185
Total Registered Volunteers		335

Of our c. 200 active volunteers, 70 volunteers participate in regular weekly outdoor Land Management sessions. Volunteers support us with programming events which run

¹ Active volunteers are those that have had hours logged in the last 12 months. During COVID, we widened this definition to 24 months

throughout the year, and activity that takes place outside of office hours such as community wardens and office admin.

Some of our volunteering is project based where we request support for a few weeks. 6% of volunteers in financial year 22/23 volunteered in more than one role.

Our volunteers, in the main, are over the retirement age and come from within a 30 mile radius. They are predominantly male but some groups have a more even gender split.

As our volunteering is generally within office hours (Monday-Friday, 9-5) we have a barrier to attracting younger people or those working full-time who would be available in evenings or weekends.

Our volunteer opportunities are communicated via a weekly volunteer bulletin which goes out to all 335 registered volunteers.

Setting the context

Internal perspective

We looked at the areas where we felt we had strengths in our current approach, and where challenges and opportunities might be, resulting in the following 'SWOT' analysis:

Strengths	Groups of long-term volunteers Regular, consistent communication High levels of participation in recognition events Work of volunteers is deeply appreciated
Weaknesses	Inconsistency of volunteer manager approach Sessions dependent on access to a car and framed around office hours
Opportunities	We cannot meet existing demand for volunteering (young people doing work experience, one-off use of employee volunteer days etc)
Threats	Ensuring volunteer and organisational needs align Potential for an inconsistent volunteer experience as growth in volunteer numbers isn't matched with staff numbers

External perspective

Looking at external factors helps inform our strategic decision making. It gives us a sense of the external landscape affecting who may volunteer, their motivations and where volunteering sits within wider society.

There is a great deal of ongoing and anticipated change in our external environment. The major ones likely to affect us are:

- Social – the growth of local communities due to building developments. Whilst this will make our spaces busier, it brings people into the area who are more likely to be working full-time (and with families) who have limited historical connection to our spaces or Earth Trust.
- Social – as the state retirement age increases and cost of living rises, people may a) be less likely to retire earlier, or b) have less time to volunteer.
- Environmental – extreme weather conditions materially affect our land management operation (what can be done and when during the season) but also affects when people are willing to volunteer for outdoor activities – staying away in extreme heat, cold or rain.

“Competitor” analysis

Other charitable organisations, of course, are not competitors in a commercial sense, but looking at similar organisations working in our sector helps us understand what others are doing and how we may learn from them.

The themes of what others are doing well include:

- A registration process for volunteers which includes being able to directly apply for roles earlier on
- A [trainee scheme](#) to help younger people build up skills through volunteering to help enter the conservation sector
- A learning and development programme which builds skills, knowledge and networks
- Higher profile recognition schemes to say thank you and recognise service

Reflecting on what others are doing, we can demonstrate good practice on:

- Information about the roles available and focus on risk assessment & health & safety
- The culture within Earth Trust on its approach to volunteers
- The frequency in which we talk about or showcase volunteering through our digital channels and communication work

Strategic focus

We have identified the following priorities over the next three years that will enable us to provide an improved volunteer experience and achieve our organisational objectives:

1. Evolving our model to increase weekend and one-off volunteering
2. A step change in the quality of the volunteer experience
3. Growing our volunteer community to reflect our growing organisation

Evolving our model

Our current volunteer programme model predominantly facilitates volunteering opportunities in office hours from Monday to Friday. This barrier limits diversity as people working the usual working week, in education or with caring responsibilities will struggle to regularly volunteer during the week.

Our green spaces have the heaviest footfall on the days we're not actively facilitating volunteering.

Year	Enabling Activity
2023/24	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pilot regular weekend land management volunteering• Improve quality of volunteer demographic data
2024/25	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Process and activity for one-off community group volunteering, ie Scouts or Guides, Duke of Edinburgh participants and work experience• Develop materials for one-off volunteering• Expand weekend volunteer opportunities
2025/26	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Proactive approaches to employers on how to use employee volunteer days

A step change in the experience

Creating a framework for good volunteer management will ensure minimum standards are met whilst enabling Staff Leads to lead their volunteers in a way which reflect their style and meets the work required. Volunteers who understand their role and feel supported are more likely to stay and talk positively about their experience.

As volunteer numbers increase, we have an opportunity to utilise the skills and experiences of our volunteers to lead session. A Session Leader role already exists but this could benefit from being more structured, with ongoing training and support. A Session Leader could be a staff member or volunteer.

A commitment to creating a culture of learning and support begins with personal development plans for people. If a volunteer wants to apply their existing skills or develop new ones - this could be through new technical skills to operate machinery or volunteering in another part of the Trust - a development plan will allow us to better allocate resources to support skills development.

Year	Enabling Activity
2023/24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volunteer Handbook launched • Define the Session Leader role • Agreed Volunteer Management principles and practises • Benchmarked survey data on volunteer experience
2024/25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved digital access to materials • Session Leader handbook launched with annual training programme • Every regular volunteer who would like one has a personal development plan to identify skills development • Training programme for Volunteer Managers
2025/26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External accreditation for our volunteer programme • Training programme for Session Leaders expanded

Supporting a growing organisation

By 2027 we are expecting a significant increase in the activities being delivered at Earth Trust Centre. The structural developments include a café and visitor experience - Earth Adventure and Earth Uncovered – as well as an increase in the activities we already do with more public programming and events, more education sessions through evenings and weekend delivery and increased public footfall around our green spaces.

To minimise the “lag” that exists between a development appearing and volunteering within that opportunity, we need to scenario plan, anticipate, and grow the number of volunteers as an integrated part of each stage.

Success of the future centre development is dependent on us introducing new volunteer roles and increasing our volunteer community. It is an exciting time of growth ahead and our volunteer programme is critical to helping us support these developments and expanding our reach and impact.

Year	Enabling Activity
2023/24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome Hub open with weekend volunteers • Plan for weekend education volunteering • Organisational scenario planning for future projects
2024/25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing the learning from the scenario planning • Defined, and begun recruitment for the roles required for the next phase of centre development

Volunteer community

We are assuming that our volunteer community primarily increases through the organic growth of teams themselves, ie additional land groups, a second day for centre gardeners, new sessions for centre maintenance or office work due to staff teams growing their capability and capacity to support volunteering.

The original 2020 plans for the centre development assumed an additional 60 volunteers within the welcome hub, Earth Adventure, café and office. Some of these areas will require piloting and staff time dedicated to implementing them.

Fundraising opportunities

This Volunteer Plan is not dependent on a significant resource increase however, increased funding could provide us with a platform to improve the reach or quality of our volunteering.

The plan would benefit from funding through:

- Contributing to staff costs
- Designing the training programme for volunteer managers and/or leaders
- Purchasing equipment to support digitisation of processes
- Paying for external training for volunteers
- Contributing to the costs of networking or thank you sessions

Contact

If you would like to discuss the plan or receive a copy of the full version, or if you feel you could help us achieve our aspirations or contribute to the development of our volunteer programme, we would love to hear from you. Please get in touch with:

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