



Volunteer Development Strategy

The canal connects the community, and the
community connects through the canal



OUR PARTNERS



Introduction

This volunteer strategy has been written in service to the partnership, partner organisations and volunteers. It acknowledges and builds upon their extensive experience of volunteering, commitment and individual and collective skills and expertise.

Beyond this immediate scope, this strategy outlines a **vision and values for volunteering** that ultimately aims to serve the canal itself, the communities that are historically and presently entwined with the canal, and the current and future generations of people who enjoy the canal.

Volunteers and volunteering are at the heart of this project. Volunteers started the initial campaign to restore the canal, and their passion remains the force driving the project forward. They are crucial for the successful completion of the practical work as well as for achieving the goals as outlined in the theory of change:

- **A renewed sense and spirit of place** which encourages enjoyment and understanding of the natural, historic and cultural heritage of the Cotswolds, reconnecting people to their canal heritage and cultural assets, providing a national visitor destination and bringing social, cultural and economic regeneration to our communities.
- **Resilient and cohesive partnership, networks and communities** which invest in people, relationships and grassroots organisations, adopt best practice inclusive approaches to participation and facilitate broad and meaningful engagement in heritage restoration and canal management.
- **Embedded and creative pathways for heritage learning** which engage schools, colleges, local groups and the wider community, inspire historical enquiry, celebrate archives and engineering, protect wildlife and navigate people into training and employment.

Why a strategy?

Each organisation in the CCC partnership is in a different position in terms of volunteering and volunteer management, ranging from a handful of like-minded people gathering quite informally to organisations with several hundred volunteers and paid volunteer coordinators - and everything in between. The different approaches stem from how these organisations were set up and have developed over time, and they all have their validity and value.



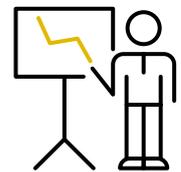
The landscape of volunteering is changing

However, there are good reasons to look at volunteering from a strategic perspective now. The landscape of volunteering is changing. Research has shown that volunteer **numbers are at an all-time low** since studies on this began in 2013/14¹. The three most common reasons stated by people who do not take part in volunteering are that they have work commitments, they have other things to do in their spare time and that they need to look after children.

It is not straightforward to explain these, but it is likely that people have to work more or for longer into their planned retirement to make ends meet during the ongoing **cost-of-living crisis**. **Childcare** is expensive and can be a strain for already struggling family budgets, so this role is often undertaken by grandparents. There might have also been **lifestyle changes** during the pandemic which means that people might prioritise other activities like sports, travelling or pets over volunteering.

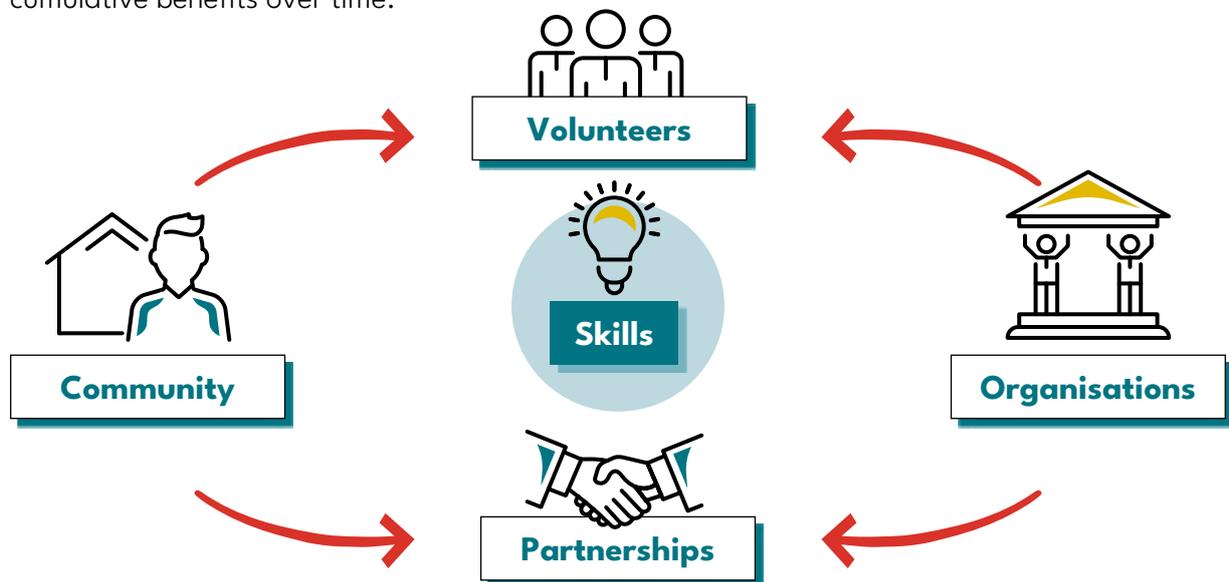
Volunteer numbers are dropping

At the same time as there is a drop in volunteer numbers, there is a **growing need to professionalise/formalise volunteer management processes** in order to make volunteering inclusive, accessible and safe, and to comply with requirements from the Charity Commission, funders and legislation. Some aspects, e.g. safeguarding, can easily feel overwhelming or be misunderstood, especially as guidelines change regularly.



Cumulative benefits of volunteer development

Investing time and energy into a strategic, developmental approach to volunteering will reap cumulative benefits over time.



Strengthening volunteer management and numbers will boost your organisation, which builds capacity to take part in activities with the CCC partnership (or other local networks). This enables more activities benefitting the local community, which in turn engages them in volunteering.

¹ [Community Life Survey 2023/24: Volunteering and charitable giving - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/community-life-survey-2023-24-volunteering-and-charitable-giving)

Our vision for 2027

The four strategic goals



1. A robust volunteer community

Putting volunteers' needs and wellbeing at the heart of our practice creates the right conditions for successful volunteer engagement and fosters a positive culture beneficial to all.

1. The canal partnership is one of the first places that people think of when they consider volunteering, with a reputation to be a fulfilling, fun and safe place to volunteer. Up and down the canal, volunteers are working on the water, on the towpath or in the wider canal corridor, engaged in activities that are fulfilling for them and that benefit the local community in a whole variety of ways.
2. The needs and aspirations of volunteers are considered alongside the needs of the project. Recruitment of new volunteers is strategic and widespread. Volunteers are not merely means to get work done, but each of them is an asset that is appreciated, nurtured and given the chance to develop and grow. The physical and mental wellbeing of all volunteers, including role holders, is paramount. We recognise when roles need to be in a paid rather than a voluntary capacity and secure resources to support these.
3. It is easy to find out about and apply for volunteer opportunities. Every volunteer's motivations, aspirations and skills are different, so they are explored at the recruitment stage to make sure that each person is matched to the right role, team or organisation.

4. All volunteers feel warmly welcomed, supported and well managed throughout their volunteering journey - from the first contact and recruitment, through onboarding and active volunteering, up to a harmonious exit.
5. Volunteering is underpinned by strong policies and procedures. Regularly reviewed and updated, they make for robust organisations that work in an effective, safe and inclusive manner.
6. Volunteers feel appreciated and their contributions are celebrated in ways that are meaningful to them.
7. Volunteers' voices are sought and heard, feedback is considered and outcomes are communicated.



We will achieve this by:

- a. Keeping up-to-date with local and national trends for volunteering and best practice (National Council for Volunteer Organisations, Association for Volunteer Managers, Vision for Volunteering etc.).
- b. Offering this strategy to each partner, to customise it to suit their needs, aided by the CCC strategy implementation toolkit.
- c. Ensuring that best practice policies and procedures for volunteer management are in place that are appropriate for each organisation and include, amongst others, onboarding, induction and dealing with challenging situations.
- d. Developing appropriate volunteer management systems that hold, e.g., personal details, training records, expenses and important documents and that comply with data protection and cyber security requirements.
- e. Consulting with volunteers on what works well and what could be improved, as well as ways they would like to be recognised, e.g. thank you events or service awards.
- f. Developing effective, attractive and innovative recruitment practices.
- g. Working jointly on volunteer recruitment through the Volunteering Action Group, including a shared website and recruitment materials for the partnership.



2. A broad demographic

Life-long volunteering opportunities engage a wide demographic of people 'on the doorstep' of the canal and offer a welcoming, inclusive and accessible place to volunteer.

1. Volunteering is an activity that everyone is involved in (and that people might not even think of as formal volunteering) – during a lunch break, walking the dog, after school and in their free time. We encourage contributions of all members of the local community - no matter who they are, there is a role and a warm welcome for them.
2. We value all volunteers and the skills and knowledge they bring. Experienced volunteers have an invaluable depth of knowledge and tradition to share, whilst new volunteers can invigorate projects with new ideas and different approaches. We appreciate that diversity brings new opportunities that help us to stay relevant and move with the times.
3. There is a wide range of volunteering opportunities that fit in with and support different life stages, from families and young people to those of working and retirement age. Across the partnership, there is something to suit everyone, including indoor and outdoor settings, varying skill levels, different days of the week and a range of activity levels. When situations change, volunteers are supported into roles that fit better with their new circumstances.

4. We are proactively inclusive. Working with the local community and other experts, we understand the barriers that prevent different groups from volunteering and try to reduce these. We trial new ways of reaching out to different groups and communities and are open to share our learning widely.
5. Safeguarding is firmly embedded into organisational culture, making sure that everyone is protected from harm.

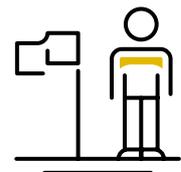


We will achieve this by:

- a. Keeping up-to-date with best practice to inclusion and offering training around safeguarding, accessibility and mental health.
- b. Having a broad recruitment campaign for all roles, advertising widely locally, through county wide schemes (Go Vol Glos, You're Welcome) and through services (e.g. employment guides, social prescribers and mental health guides).
- c. Alongside 'typical' roles, promoting those that showcase the scope of opportunities and that might attract new audiences e.g. less physical or home-based roles, or those with specialist skills.
- d. Developing a joint micro-volunteering scheme that offers 'bite-sized' volunteering – short, flexible opportunities with no ongoing commitment - including one-off 'all hands on deck' opportunities promoted across the partnership.
- e. Working within the partnership and wider community to find new audiences that might benefit from volunteering (e.g. care leavers, veterans).
- f. Exploring and trialling ways of engaging with families, young people, professionals and corporate volunteers.
- g. Making sure that everyone feels welcome and supported by routinely enquiring about and supporting adjustments and accessibility needs with all volunteers and being transparent about possible limitations.
- h. Being visible in the wider Voluntary, Community & Social Enterprise (VCSE) partnerships so that the project is seen as a great opportunity for all.

3. A skilled volunteer community

Volunteers and organisations achieve their full potential through coordinated learning and development, including creative pathways to ensure the survival of heritage skills.



The canal project is a place of excellence for volunteer learning and development, and all volunteers are ambassadors for the canal.

1. We establish ways of learning from each other, utilising the expertise of volunteers, organisations and the wider community to enrich our knowledge about the canal and its cultural, historical and environmental aspects, strengthen the volunteer offer and foster a sense of belonging to the project.
2. Volunteers, including trustees, are well-trained, confident and up to date with all aspects of their role, including safeguarding, health and safety and any specialist skill required. There are routes and support for development and progression.
3. Heritage skills, like canal construction, archiving and maintaining historic looms, are safeguarded and passed down to the next generations.
4. Formal and informal awards and accreditations recognise learning, reward volunteering, foster confidence and enhance work prospects.

We will achieve this by:

- a. Developing role descriptions and systems to record training and certifications.
- b. Shared training opportunities for trustees and volunteers, e.g. safeguarding, first aid and inclusion, and considering how a ‘train the trainer’ scheme could benefit the partnership.
- c. Bringing volunteers together through walks and talks to share knowledge and experiences.
- d. Learning from other volunteer schemes, e.g. canal/heritage restoration programmes or local organisations.
- e. Developing the capacity and confidence to host young volunteers through a Young People’s Working Group, which will help to enable opportunities for learning from the canal, e.g. construction, engineering, museum and archive skills. Reaching out to local places of learning (secondary schools, colleges, universities) and seek collaborations.

4. A thriving partnership

Collaborating as a strong and sustainable partnership, we make sure that our activities have the greatest benefits and a lasting positive impact on our volunteers, organisations and the wider community.



Within the partnership, there is a sense of joy, common vision (the ‘golden thread’), trust and openness, and a recognition that together we can create much more than each of us individually (‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts’).

1. We celebrate the individual character, history, goals and strengths of each partner and are aware of their role, current projects and points of contact.
2. We meet in collaborative ways, building on the expertise, interests and needs within our partnership to co-produce activities. We learn from each other, offer support to overcome challenges and celebrate individual and joint successes. Volunteers on all levels have the opportunity to get involved and have their voices heard.
3. Volunteers have a good understanding of the project and have a sense of pride to be involved. The volunteering offer is flexible and joined up so that people can volunteer and share their skills with multiple organisations, bringing the volunteer community closer together.
4. We tap into the rich community spirit and interest in nature, wellbeing and creativity that is present in Stroud, Stonehouse and Gloucestershire. We regularly review our stakeholder engagement and identify who is not currently ‘at the table’, actively seeking out knowledgeable partners in order to deliver the maximum benefit to local communities.

We will achieve this by:

- a. Developing an appropriate future governance operating model that brings partners together in order to make decisions about the canal and volunteering.
- b. Building on and strengthening relationships between individuals and organisations through social get-togethers, training, celebrations and other opportunities.
- c. Improving communication with volunteers, stakeholders and the wider community.
- d. Holding regular action groups and forums, including a volunteering action group, to collaboratively work on shared goals.
- e. Showcasing the project and partners through joint events (like the Canal Festival).
- f. Sharing resources including training, funding, equipment, expertise and volunteers.
- g. Recruiting and training volunteers for specific roles that could be shared (e.g. fundraisers).

Strategy development

The strategy was developed utilising the national Vision for Volunteering² initiative which focusses on five areas: power, awareness and appreciation, equality and inclusion, collaboration and experimentation. It pulls together voices from partner organisations, individual volunteers, the project team, advisers and those not currently engaged in volunteering and was endorsed by the CCC project board in November 2024.

The role of the Cotswold Canals Connected Community Engagement Team is in an advisory, supportive and/or mentoring capacity. For the duration of the project, they will support the partner organisations to establish good foundations in volunteer management and look at ways to grow and experiment, in line with the project's activity plans.

CCC project volunteer definition

We have also developed a definition of a CCC project volunteer as this is useful for clarifying the scope of the strategy and allocating resources.

A CCC volunteer is someone who gives unpaid time, skills and expertise, by free choice, to benefit

- the historic and cultural assets,
- the environment and/or
- the communities connected with the canals.

CCC project volunteers are united through a sense and spirit of place. The actual role, frequency, longevity and formality of volunteering are less important than the notion of being an ambassador for the canal.

The partnership

The partnership includes a diverse range of organisations, each with their own views and expertise of the canal, distinct set of volunteers and individual volunteer management structure. Where the strategy talks about 'we', it means the canal partnership. It currently consists of:

- Stroud District Council
- Cotswold Canals Trust
- Stroud Valley Canal Company
- Company of Proprietors for Stroudwater Navigation
- Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust
- Stroud Valleys Project
- Stroudwater Navigation Archive Charity
- Stroudwater Textile Trust
- Cotswold Boatmobility

Other organisations are involved in project work as well, e.g. the Museum in the Park and Ship Inn Community Enterprise (SplCE).

² <https://www.visionforvolunteering.org.uk/>