

**Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty  
People & Places Final Report  
April 2008 - April 2010**

**People and Places  
Project**

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# People and Places Project – Final Report

## 1. Background

The Mendip Hills AONB Partnership funding partners had discussed the potential for additional conservation work to be undertaken in the AONB to support delivery of the AONB Management Plan but lacked the resources to initiate this. Natural England then offered £20,000 to set up an initiative that would seek to provide volunteering opportunities across the AONB.

The funding was on condition that a minimum of a further £10,000 would be raised to match this contribution and that aims and targets were agreed at outset. The AONB Unit approached the National Trust and Somerset Wildlife Trust to be partners in the pilot project, to become known as the People and Places Project with the AONB Unit and Natural England.

Local authority partners contributed through their AONB core funding contribution plus Somerset County Council made an additional contribution in the first year. The National Trust and Somerset Wildlife Trust also made financial contributions (see Appendix I).

## 2. Aims and targets

The four delivery partners AONB Unit, National Trust, Somerset Wildlife Trust and Natural England formed a Steering Group to manage the project and agreed the original aims and targets:

- To promote volunteering in the Mendip Hills.
- To target new groups of people to volunteer on the Mendip Hills.
- To specifically encourage ethnic minority groups, women and younger volunteers to our existing selection
  
- 2 annual celebratory events
- 1000 leaflets produced
- 10 media articles
- 80% satisfaction rating from participants' activities
- 40 referrals to be from under represented groups
- 2 annual celebration events
- 18 new volunteer events delivered by 3 partners

### 3. Project Delivery

#### 3.1 The Project Officer

As all the partners involved lacked sufficient staff resources to deliver additional volunteering opportunities and to pilot joint working to manage, train and coordinate volunteers the need for a part time project officer (22hrs per week) was identified in the early discussion stages.

The Project Officer was appointed through an open recruitment process and started in post in April 2008 on a two year contract. The post was based in the AONB Unit offices and employed by Somerset County Council. Merryn Nisbet who was appointed had been the AONB Lifelines Project Officer for two years coordinating volunteers undertaking dry stone wall survey work and organising volunteer events connected with that project. Merryn's knowledge and experience of both the local area and local organisations and volunteers was seen as beneficial to the project to get it up and running as quickly as possible.

The project eventually had three different people taking on the PPP Officer role due to Merryn's maternity leave (Sept2008), the maternity cover Kate Avery herself taking maternity leave (Feb 2009) and the cover provided by Norma Newby until Merryn returned to post June 2009. There is no doubt that the change of staff impacted on the project delivery as each person had to familiarise themselves with the project and work underway.

#### 3.2 Revised targets

At the end of the first year the project was reviewed. The aims stayed the same but the partners were aware that a number of the original targets were not going to be achieved for various reasons.

**The evaluation cards and equal opportunities monitoring forms** were not being returned in significant numbers. Feedback from task leaders showed a reluctance to use them as most volunteers were their regular volunteers who did not want to fill out a form each time they volunteered. It was therefore agreed not to continue use of the cards therefore targets to attract under represented groups or record satisfaction were not reported.

The partners recognised that with limited internal staff resources they were unable to run many new **volunteering tasks** that were in addition to their current programmes. So whilst there were opportunities for new volunteers to join some tasks there were not enough tasks being set up to provide a

regular range and frequency of tasks that might attract new volunteers. It was therefore agreed to:

- Expand list of contacts to include other volunteers groups (e.g. Mendip Society, Active Mendip, Hawk and Owl Trust) to increase number of events/tasks on the Volunteering page of the AONB web site.

The **training courses** that had been run in the first year had proved very popular and successful. They had demonstrated a way of delivering common interest training for volunteers from a range of organisations thereby being cost effective and guaranteeing that courses were fully booked. It was therefore agreed to focus the PPP officer time on providing further joint training

- e.g. First Aid Training for Hill Walkers

Due to the staff changes it was not been possible to organise a **celebratory event** in Year one. It was therefore agreed to:

- Coordinate a one day event for volunteers to recognise the achievements of the volunteers based on the event organised by SWT in previous year. The event included presentations by volunteers about their activities and voluntary organisations displays to promote volunteering with their group (See programme; Appendix III)
- Organise a forum after the above event to include PPP Steering Group members and other who have an interest in volunteering to agree way forward.

### 3.3 Work undertaken

3.3.1 Volunteer Taster packs to provide an introduction to volunteering in the AONB were produced containing:

- Leaflet showing map of area with the partners land marked on
- Welcome letter
- Equal opportunities monitoring forms
- Training and volunteering evaluation forms

3.3.2 Volunteer tasks were organised and formed volunteer programme:

- New volunteering tasks were organised by the partner bodies and led by paid staff or established volunteers.

- Mendip Conservation Volunteer group was set up with the help of a AONB Sustainable Development Fund grant, creating new volunteering opportunities on Somerset Wildlife Trust Reserves.

3.3.3 Promotion of volunteer activities organised through the project to attract volunteers to participate was undertaken in various forms:

- Web page created on the Mendip Hills AONB web site that included update programme of volunteer tasks, training and surveying
- Regular press releases were sent out.
- Quarterly newsletters sent to all existing and new volunteers
- Email and postal contacts of existing known volunteers were contacted with information about new volunteering opportunities
- Details of volunteering were uploaded to the Volunteering Bureaus in Bristol & Bath who added information to the 'Do-it' volunteering website
- Publicity about volunteering opportunities sent to organisations in Bristol.
- Posters were displayed around the area promoting the project including Drs Surgeries advertising the health benefits to those who don't normally take part in practical volunteering.
- Attended the Bristol Festival of Nature event in June 2009

#### 3.3.4 Training

At the start of the project a one day event was held with the Mendip Hills AONB Volunteer Rangers about training preferences and practical volunteering suggestions. The PPP partners consulted within their own organisations and a number of common interest training events were identified.

PPP Training courses run were:

- Guided walks Training 30<sup>th</sup> January 2009
- Countryside Law 28<sup>th</sup> February 2009
- Brush cutter strimmer training 11<sup>th</sup> May 2009
- Emergency First Aid for Hill Walkers November 28<sup>th</sup> 2009
- Message from the Mendips – volunteer ranger training 6<sup>th</sup> Feb 2010

3.3.5 A volunteer database was set up to monitor requests however as noted in Revised Targets information relating to satisfaction and under-represented groups was not recorded after year one.

- 90 new volunteers requesting information taster pack, 21 returned registration forms.

- Newsletters were sent out quarterly to this list via the email distribution list informing volunteers of new projects to work on. For those without email postal newsletters were sent.
- 69 would like to receive emails about volunteering opportunities

#### 4. Key Achievements

##### Volunteer Database

- The 90 volunteers requesting information are now recorded into the People & Places database for future mailings and contact.
- 45 of those requesting information were female and therefore meeting the target for an under-represented group.

##### Training

Training was set up for existing volunteers, 6 training days were provided and all were fully booked:

Training	Number attended
Dry Stone wall	6
Guided Walks	15
Countryside Law	25
Brushcutter	6
First Aid for Hill Walkers	9
Message from the Mendips ranger/warden awareness	16
Total	77

##### Media Coverage

- 20 articles published in local press
- 1 radio interview on BBC Somerset Sound

##### New Volunteering events open to all volunteers

- 50 new volunteering events were coordinated through the PPP. See list of tasks in Appendix ii. This exceeded the original target of 18

##### Volunteering Celebration

- The volunteer celebration was held on Saturday March 5<sup>th</sup> 2010 chaired by Richard Bull President of the Mendip Society and attended by 60 volunteers. Presentations by 6 volunteers showed a diverse array of work that is being done in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

- The event included choice of four workshops:
  - What do volunteers expect from volunteering?
  - Future Cooperation, who will take the lead?
  - Communication, working groups, Volunteer Forum?
  - Ideas for new volunteering opportunities & how to achieve them

*(Feedback from the workshop sessions is shown in Appendix III)*

Feedback from the day was very positive. The main issues raised in the workshops was how communication could be better in the future and that volunteers need to be inspired and enjoy what they are doing in order to continue.

- Suggestions for a joint article in the Mendip Times written by volunteers from a different group each month were well received.
- An email list of all volunteers who attended the day will be sent to all so if volunteers wish to contact one another they can do so.
- Volunteers would like to socialise between groups but perhaps in a less formal environment than the celebration day. People want the informality of a 'pub meet up'.

## 5. Conclusions

Staff changes were an issue and there is no doubt they hindered the project however, the project delivered on the key objectives of promoting volunteering and attracting new volunteers. The high standard of training provided to a significant number of dedicated volunteers across the four partner organisations and others will continue to benefit the area.

The People & Places project was a pilot and therefore subject to changes as it progressed; certain targets that were originally set proved difficult as previously mentioned. Targets not met were:

- 80% satisfaction rating from volunteers was not recorded. Most volunteers were regular volunteers and had no desire to fill in feedback forms on a regular basis so they were not required to.
- 40 referrals of new volunteers from under –represented groups to partner organisations was not recorded as the Project Officer directed new volunteers to each of the organisations but did not have the time to follow up whether they signed up with a particular group, and the volunteer group would not always know that they had been referred via the PPP Project Officer. There were not adequate project resources (eg

transport or officer time) to facilitate bringing special groups or under-represented groups from nearby urban areas.

The percentage of ethnic minority groups living within the AONB is less than 1%. To attract ethnic minorities from a wider catchment area that includes Bristol and Weston-super-Mare, transport would need to be laid on and outreach work provided in areas where a higher percentage (3%) of this population demographic lives. It is worth noting that National Parks that have additional resources have been trying to attract ethnic minorities and yet their figure is still only 1%. The Mosaic project launched on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2009 by Natural England and the Access to Nature Fund, through The Big Lottery is now seeking to address this in the 14 National Parks.

Sharing of information – The Steering Group was very useful in bringing together staff in the different organisation to discuss volunteering and to compare and assist each other on volunteering policies, insurance issues with regard to volunteers. The National Trust and Somerset Wildlife Trust had well developed guidance for volunteers that proved useful for the AONB in writing new guidance for its volunteer rangers.

Due to the restrictions of data protection the Project Officer was not able to have volunteer contact details from all the partners. Although many were obtained gradually over the course of the project this did delay contacting volunteers at the start.

There was less movement of volunteers between different partner events than expected. This shows that volunteers do have loyalty to their organisations or group and have little desire or perhaps time to volunteer for another organisation or on alternative sites. Feedback from one Volunteer Reserve Manager with Somerset Wildlife Trust was that “The reserve that I usually spend all my time on has actually received less attention than it would have done had I not joined the volunteer group. Rather than going once a week to the reserve, the group visits the reserve on one or two outings a year, with a net loss of volunteer hours.

Each of the volunteer leaders found that communication was poor between themselves and their host partner organisation. If a similar partnership was formed in the future it is important that a paid staff member works closely with volunteer coordinators so that there is a direct link between volunteers and the work being done on the ground.

A real strength of the PPP was joint training and bringing volunteers together through these events and the celebration event.

## **6. The future**

Volunteering in the Mendip Hills AONB is thriving. There are many people regularly volunteering and others who assist with short-term projects including village projects that have received AONB Sustainable Development Funding.

The Future of Volunteering in the Mendip Hills AONB Countryside (2009) report funded by the Sustainable Development Fund vision proposed a PPP centre staffed by 2 paid posts. The centre would be in a high profile situation and hold information on all the latest volunteering opportunities and local information about the AONB. The funding would come through a PPP Steering Group.

Is this achievable? There are many organisations investing in volunteers. The PPP showed that joint training, coordinated publicity and promotion can reduce the burden on existing staff or certainly allow more to happen. The current economic climate is causing severe financial pressures and everyone is looking for ways to reduce costs but deliver more effectively. Joint working needs to continue to be developed.

Feedback from the volunteer celebration day in March was that there needs to be improved coordination and communication with volunteers in terms of what is going on and having direct contact with staff, regular training and greater appreciation of their efforts with opportunities for social events. The PPP was starting to provide some of this.

The PPP Steering group proposed organising a forum to follow the March event. This needs to happen to identify ways of continuing to pool resources to benefit volunteering and the organisations.

The possibility of continuing the following should be considered:

- Annual volunteer event to celebrate success

- Joint training

- More opportunities for volunteering

- Wider range of volunteering opportunities including office based work

## APPENDICES

### Appendix I The Budget

#### Expenditure

Staff costs (including recruitment and redundancy)	£29776.81
Staff training	£425
Travel and sub	£315.50
Promotional material (web page, printing)	£3872
Training events	£4302.90
Volunteer celebratory event	£608.40
Total	£39300.61

#### Income

Natural England	£21343.50
Somerset County Council	£4094
Mendip Hills AONB	£5103.11
National Trust	£3500
Somerset Wildlife Trust	£3500
Sustainable Development Fund	£1120
Training income	£640
Total	£39300.61

## Appendix II

TARGET	YEAR 1				YEAR 2				
	Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec	Jan - Mar	Apr - Jun	Jul - Sept	Oct - Dec	Jan - Mar	
1000 leaflets produced		1000							
10 media Articles	2	4	3		1	3	4	3	20
80% Satisfaction rating from participants' activities									
40 referrals to partners from new volunteers					2				
50% new referrals to be from under represented groups						1			
2 annual celebration events								1	1
18 new volunteer events delivered by the 3 (4) partners	1	3	9	9	6	7	8	7	50

Under represented groups = young, ethnic minority groups & women

Training	Attendance	
Dry Stone Walling	6	<i>5 days x Dry stone wall repairs</i>
Guided walks	15	<i>3 days x Hedge laying, planting and restoration</i>
Countryside Law	25	<i>7 days x Scrub management and clearance</i>
Brushcutter	6	<i>3 days x Vegetation clearance from a historic sites and car park</i>
First Aid	9	<i>2 days x Path clearance</i>
Ranger	16	<i>2 days x Ragwort pulling</i>
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<i>1 day Information board repairs</i>

**Year 2 additional volunteering tasks open to all volunteers 04.09 – 03.10**

- 7 x scrub clearance / management*
- 2 x coppicing*
- 8 dry stone wall repairs*
- 3 x pond clearance*
- 2 X bracken clearance*
- 1 x Ragwort clearance*
- 1 x footpath maintenance*
- 1 x bog clearance*
- 2 X Litter picking*

*This list does not include any additional tasks added by The National Trust or Natural England*

## Appendix III

### Volunteering in the Mendip Hills – Now & in the Future

Location - Shipham village Hall  
Date - Sat 6<sup>th</sup> March 2010

#### PROGRAMME

- 10.00 Richard Bull Richard Bull, President Mendip Society
- 10.05 Introduction / summarise achievements. Merryn Nisbet PPP
- 10.10 Alternatives to the practical work MHAONB, Rob Spraggon
- 10.25 Mendip Society / Rickford Association – Mike McLennan /  
Judith Tranter
- 10.55 Rebuilding Dry Stone Walls, the Mendip Hills Chris Stephens
- 11.10 Coffee
- 11.25 Hawk & Owl Trust latest news- Chris Sperring
- 11.50 - Workshops
- Workshops rep from each organisation or each group.
1. What do volunteers expect from volunteering?
  2. Brainstorm volunteering activities: Now / Future /How?
  3. Volunteer forum? working group? Communication
  4. Future co operation? Who should take the lead
- 12.50 Chair to summarise morning and feedback from workshops
- 1pm Lunch and view displays
- 1.45 / 2pm Walk, 1 / 1.5hrs walk, visiting sites at Dolebury Warren to  
see Volunteer work
- 3 / 3.30pm Finish

## **Workshop sessions feedback**

### **Future Co operation – Who should take the lead? Reporter Sarah Jackson, Mendip Hills AONB**

Mentoring of volunteers

Barriers: – comfort zone

Need for liaison between organisations

More local ownership, local people involvement

Local Volunteers

NT 'Roving volunteers' will assist other projects

Communication – not email – phone, direct contact

Central Hub to report to Information Awareness.

More contact with staff.

Appropriate level of staff to liase in each organisation

Other suggestions: Website, Volunteer events, training

Next year? Volunteer celebration?

### **What do volunteers expect from volunteering? Reporter Andy Mayled, National Trust**

**Enjoyment / fun:** –

**Social:** Involvement / Meet other people / like minded people / Fellow volunteers/ friendship / Companionship / Comradeship / Communication / team work

**Body, mind & health:** Activity / exercise / Enjoy outdoors / Fresh air / Satisfaction – 'Job done' / Sense of achievement / Give something back / believe in the cause

**Learning:** Knowledge / Gain new skills / Wish to remain in touch

**Connection:** Seeing different sites / Enjoy helping locally / Contribute to community – add value

**Respect, Feedback and things to work on:**

Leadership / Better organisation / coordination of events activities

Job description, clarity of expectations

Travel expenses  
Getting kids involved  
Feedback recognition  
Supervision session  
Tools to do the job / fit for purpose  
Variety of tasks, better use of full range of skills offered  
More non practical opportunities  
Opportunities to lead events / walks / talks  
Training

Better forms of communication, Working groups, Volunteer Forum? Reporter  
Merryn Nisbet, PPP Officer

**Poor communication:**

No communication back when volunteers have offered services  
Own volunteering web page rather than extra link to yet another page on  
AONB website – people loose interest  
Don't rely on one form of communication  
Information seems to disappear into a black hole.

Alternative / Additional ways of communicating.

Communication with individuals  
Communication between organisations / socialising  
Mendip Times – Great publication, volunteer page?  
If articles written to the magazine then free rather than paid pages  
Always include a list of all other contacts with each article at bottom of page.  
Run courses to encourage people / taster days  
Central point of reference for all  
Make a video of what you are doing and upload it  
People networking is very important in finding out what is going on.  
Parish Magazines  
Press  
Website  
Emails  
Telephone calls – contact volunteers personally  
Post  
Lists at garden centres  
Facebook  
Twitter  
Offer transport / lift share  
How to get young people involved?

People unsure if they can volunteer intermittently  
People frightened to volunteer as they aren't experts  
Organisations need to be open to all – 'you might not know much but you will pick it up'.  
Conference Genie – conference calls to spread the word

Ideas for New Volunteering opportunities, Reporter Toria Hare, Somerset Wildlife Trust

This discussion, despite using the structured approach came back round largely to the issue of communicating current opportunities, rather than thinking of new ones.

Each participant's ideas are listed below and divided into threads, with some explanatory notes in blue.

YOUNG PEOPLE

- School teaching aids increased

This was the idea of there being online provisions of school teaching aids which are currently either expensive or hard to find

- Engaging older children (provision of opportunities)

A need for more activities (esp. over the age of 13) to get involved in

- Work experience for young people

Opportunities for teenagers making decisions about their future to go and experience different working environments

- Ridding of barriers (H&S, young people)

The issue of the barriers against the above two thoughts – too many restrictions such as insurance, time for supervision, protection policies

- Increased family opportunities

COMMUNICATION – this was picked as the more detailed discussion topic due to emphasis from group

- An information card to hand out

The idea of having small, simple, credit card sized information to hand out, more likely to be kept than a leaflet

- Even more interaction between groups (organisations)

Increasing what the P&P project set out to do to combine opportunities with all local organisations

- Collation of surveying opportunities from all organisations

This was a very specific request from a surveying volunteer

- Clarity in what is available to do and how to find it
- A single website for all environmental volunteering by area/region

We discussed the AONB website and the fact the SWT website has wider opportunities, but the issue was the individual knowing where to go to look. One chap wanted a quick reference calendar of practical opportunities (like SWT have) but for all task days. The group went on to talk about how this is what the Volunteer centres do for wider opportunities, could they have an environmental volunteering branch? The discussion continued around these communication issues.

#### OTHER

- Training opportunities

Provision of but also the communication of what is available

- More practical groups for people to join ad hoc, low commitment

