

EDINBURGH PARKS AND OPEN SPACE VOLUNTEER ACTION PLAN

2025 - 2035

Working together we value, look after and improve the spaces we love and help unlock the potential for Edinburgh's parks and open spaces to be a place for all to enjoy in the future

DRAFT - December 2025



Introduction

Edinburgh has the highest proportion of greenspace of any large city in the UK. Around 48% of Edinburgh land is greenspace.

The City of Edinburgh Council manages 24% of this volume.

We are fortunate to have thousands of volunteers, including over 80 dedicated Friends of Greenspace groups, who collaborate with us and our partners to care for and safeguard our beautiful parks and open spaces. Their invaluable contributions to nature, heritage, well-being, and education are essential, as our public parks and open spaces would struggle to thrive without them.

Supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the National Trust's Future Parks Accelerator (FPA) Programme, a new ambitious Edinburgh Thriving Greenspaces Vision and Strategy 2050 was introduced in 2023, presenting an aspiring vision with four strategic themes. The Strategy underscores the vital role volunteers play in achieving these goals, and pledges to establish a new Volunteer Action Plan.

“Greenspaces that are at the heart of our communities and help make Edinburgh an outstanding city for wellbeing, quality of life and heritage. Greenspaces that are connected, thriving, valued and resourced.

Edinburgh Thriving Greenspaces Vision and Strategy 2050

Our Volunteer Action Plan articulates a long-term vision for volunteering in Edinburgh's public parks and open spaces. Our goal is to cultivate a sustainable and transformative volunteer programme, empowering individuals to connect with, care for, and take pride in their local parks and open spaces. By nurturing a culture of partnership and recognition, we aim to strengthen communities, enhance the health of our parks and open spaces, and create a greener Edinburgh for everyone.

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Context

Volunteering is an unpaid commitment that involves dedicating time and energy for the benefit of the environment, society, or individuals beyond one's immediate family. It is a personal right that everyone makes freely. This can include formal activities carried out through public, private, and voluntary organisations, as well as informal participation in community initiatives and social causes.

Volunteering can have significant benefits for individuals and enhances community well-being. Volunteering in parks and open spaces has two main forms: direct or indirect.

Direct volunteering

includes activities centred on the care and enjoyment of parks and open spaces, as well as helping others to appreciate these areas.

Indirect volunteering

involves activities that take place in parks and open spaces, but where the location is not the primary focus. For instance, coaching a junior sports club that meets in a park would be considered indirect volunteering. Although this side of volunteering is not included further in this action plan, we acknowledge its importance in helping to activate our parks and open spaces.



National Trends in Volunteering in 2023

Across Scotland, there has been a decline in formal volunteering, alongside a rise in community-driven initiatives. This shift has been influenced by factors such as the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, which have made traditional volunteering roles more difficult for some people to commit to. Despite an overall fall in participation rates from 2019, young people and gender disparities have diminished. Minority ethnic groups exhibit slightly lower participation rates and disabled adults were less likely to volunteer than non-disabled adults. However, young people with long-term health conditions had higher volunteering participation rates compared to those without. Individuals living in the most deprived areas exhibit lower formal volunteer participation rates compared to those in less deprived areas. (Volunteer Scotland 2023).

In response to these changes, it is vital that we make volunteering more flexible, inclusive, and rewarding. Volunteer programmes must be tailored to meet the diverse needs and preferences of today's volunteers. At the same time, recruitment strategies should focus on attracting people from all backgrounds.

Where are we now

Volunteering in Edinburgh's parks and open spaces starts on a strong foundation, thanks to the dedication of individuals and groups who invest their time, skills, and energy into caring for these essential spaces. Volunteers play a crucial role in community activities, engaging in tasks that promote environmental conservation and local heritage. They participate in initiatives such as tree planting and litter clean-ups, improving the environment and accessibility in public spaces. Additionally, they lead informative walks, organise events and cultivate gardens.

While there is a flourishing network of Friends of Greenspace groups, other volunteer opportunities are less developed. The approach to volunteering has evolved organically, lacking a structured programme for recruitment, management, and collaboration. Despite areas of excellent volunteer engagement, the lack of a cohesive database or formal recording system limits the ability to fully measure volunteer involvement.

Establishing a solid foundation for a volunteer programme is crucial to broadening and diversifying participation while continuing to empower the Friends and community groups involved. While challenges such as a lack of clear tasks, inadequate equipment, and difficulties with sign-up processes can lead to frustrations, the commitment of these individuals significantly enhances the city's parks and open spaces and fosters a vibrant community spirit.

Types of volunteering in Edinburgh's parks and open spaces

Friends of Greenspace groups are community-led organisations which collaborate with the Council to maintain local parks, cemeteries and other green and open spaces. They organise events and carry out maintenance tasks while actively participating in planning improvements. Currently, over 80 active Friends groups are creating a vital network throughout the city. The Edinburgh Green Spaces Forum supports the Friends groups in Edinburgh, bringing together representatives from various groups to provide a unified voice. This collaboration enhances the influence of Friends groups, encourages the sharing of best practices, and addresses common challenges.

Corporate volunteering is when businesses engage in team-building activities such as tree planting, litter picking, or supporting larger initiatives like creating accessible pathways.

Individual volunteering involves people on an individual basis participating in ongoing activities, including gardening, habitat creation, or educational outreach. This includes individuals who sign up with our staff and with partners, such as Edinburgh and Lothian Greenspace Trust, The Conservation Volunteers and The Royal Caledonian Horticulture Society, to carry out group volunteer tasks in our parks and open spaces.

Community initiatives is when local organisations, communities and schools lead tailored projects, such as youth engagement programmes, biodiversity monitoring, or the creation of sensory gardens. This includes groups participating in Beautiful Scotland "In Your Neighbourhood" and "In Bloom" initiatives.

Developing this plan

Through the work funded by the FPA programme between 2019 and 2021, focus groups, workshops and surveys with staff and volunteers have provided us with a clearer perspective on the functioning of volunteering in Edinburgh's public parks and open spaces. It highlighted areas that require improvement and provided valuable insights, which have helped to develop our volunteer action plan.

These findings underscore the necessity for a more organised approach to volunteering, improved partnerships with the Council, and the formalisation of management processes to enhance the volunteer experience and ensure the sustainability of Edinburgh's public parks and open spaces. The disconnect between grassroots initiatives and broader city-level recognition can diminish volunteer motivation and the sustainability of the model.

A more formalised partnership between Friends groups and volunteers with the Council is essential, with clearer roles, shared goals, and effective communication, to enhance the volunteer experience and ensure their contributions receive due recognition.



Insights from the programme workshops and surveys:



- Over 70% of volunteers engage in activities within a mile of their homes. This indicates strong community connections; however, it also suggests potential barriers for those who live further away.
- The exact number of volunteers or total volunteer hours is not known, with only 35% of Friends groups tracking their hours.
- Despite many Friends groups having large membership, they encounter engagement challenges; only around 25% of members actively participate, and recruiting for committee positions is difficult.
- Almost 90% of groups generate income through donations and grants.
- The most common activities include practical tasks, planning, and management, followed by organising events.
- A significant challenge is securing funding and skilled volunteers, especially in horticulture.
- There is a lack of formal volunteer management processes and training opportunities, despite a strong desire among volunteers for skill development and clearer roles.
- Volunteers are calling for better coordination with the Council, proactive support for volunteering projects, and a greater involvement in decision-making processes.
- While Friends groups make significant contributions to Edinburgh's strategic objectives, they often feel their efforts go unrecognised.

Our Vision

A vibrant and inclusive volunteering community that spans across Edinburgh, bringing together individuals from all backgrounds, empowering people to connect with, care for, and take pride in their local parks and open spaces. Together, they strive to maintain a beautiful, greener, and healthier Edinburgh for everyone.



Our Guiding Principles

Our approach to volunteering is shaped by the following principles:



Our Mission



To achieve our vision, we will create a sustainable and impactful volunteering model that serves both the volunteers and the community, where every volunteer feels valued and inspired to make a positive impact in local parks and open spaces. We will simplify the process for individuals to offer their help, removing any barriers that may hold back participation. This will be supported by a consistent approach to managing and recruiting volunteering, featuring central coordination alongside local leadership to ensure that each park and open space receives the necessary support tailored to its unique needs.

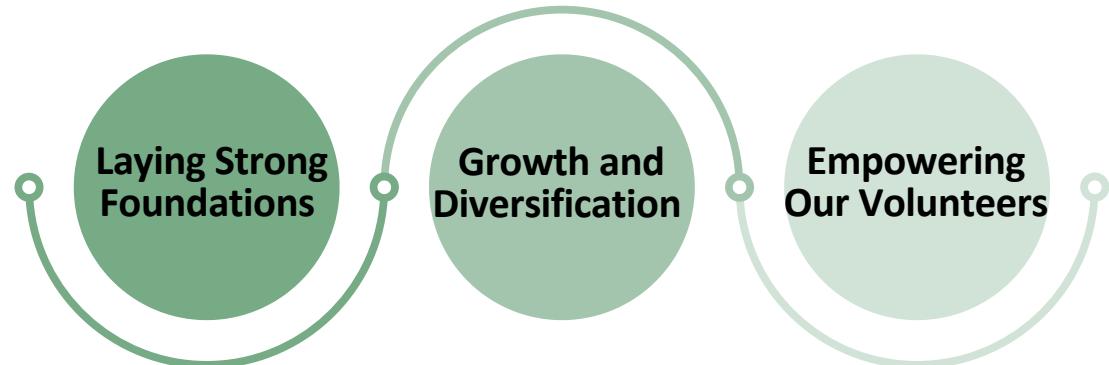
We will deliver a diverse mix of volunteer opportunities across nature, heritage, wellbeing and learning programmes, working in partnership with our Friends groups, other organisations and individuals. We will work together to create amazing spaces and foster a stronger sense of community and shared purpose.

Plans and Priorities

Developing our plans and priorities around volunteering has been a collective effort.

Staff, volunteers and partner organisations across the city have been involved or consulted in a variety of different ways.

This approach has enabled us to determine three key priorities over the next five years.



Laying strong foundations

We are committed to establishing a strong foundation for these changes, ensuring that the appropriate structures and support are in place before expanding our efforts further. This involves offering essential tools, training, and resources, alongside fostering a culture that values volunteers' significant contributions. Friends groups and volunteers have identified this support as essential.

Our objective is to create effective processes that benefit both volunteers and staff, thereby nurturing a collaborative volunteer network across the Council and other organisations. By strengthening support for Friends groups, the Edinburgh Green Spaces Forum (EGSF), our delivery partners, and all volunteers and staff, we can enhance the management of volunteer efforts.

To lay strong foundations for the volunteer programme, we will:

- **Appoint an Officer for volunteer coordination.**
- **Create a monitoring and evaluation framework.**
- **Introduce a volunteer management database.**
- **Develop clear policies, procedures, and volunteer pathways in collaboration with our delivery partners, with options for funding.**
- **Simplify sign-up, induction, and onboarding processes.**
- **Deliver staff training on volunteer coordination.**
- **Develop necessary tools and resources with relevant training programmes for volunteers.**



Growth and diversification

We believe that Edinburgh's parks and open spaces belong to everyone, and everyone should have an opportunity to play a part in caring for their spaces. Working with our partners to grow and diversify our volunteer base with a nurturing environment will ensure we attract, support and retain volunteers from across the city into suitable opportunities that will enable them to grow and contribute to their communities. Volunteering is about more than individual contributions. It's about building strong connections between people, communities, and organisations. This Action Plan seeks to strengthen the network of collaboration that underpins volunteering in Edinburgh's parks and open spaces.

To grow and diversify our volunteer base, we will:

- **Develop a communications and engagement framework along with communication channels and publicity materials.**
- **Develop flexible volunteering roles tailored to individual and group interests.**
- **Launch campaigns to attract diverse groups, including youth and underrepresented communities.**
- **Foster strong partnerships with our delivery partners, Friends groups and corporate organisations.**
- **Develop an annual volunteer work programme.**



Empowering Our Volunteers

Empowering communities is essential to achieving our vision for Edinburgh's parks and open spaces, allowing us to connect with people to transform lives locally. By fostering a shared sense of ownership with our volunteers, we can ensure they have a voice in shaping the future of the city's parks and open spaces. Their voices are crucial in this process, as it is their insights and ideas that will guide our efforts. When volunteers feel heard and valued, their connection to these areas deepens, creating a stronger commitment to their care and enhancement. This active engagement not only enriches the community but also highlights the indispensable role each volunteer plays in creating thriving spaces.

We aim to build stronger partnerships between volunteers and staff, where we are working together because we all care about our natural heritage. Sharing knowledge, expertise, and the lived reality of citizens helps to solve problems, inspire changes and stimulate ideas that both inform and direct decision-making processes.

To empower our volunteers, we will:

- **Offer training and skill-building opportunities (e.g. conservation, gardening, etc).**
- **Provide recognition through events, awards, and impact sharing.**
- **Support volunteer-led initiatives and Friends groups.**
- **Work with volunteers to co-design our site work plans and management plans.**
- **Work closely with the Edinburgh Green Spaces Forum to nurture new groups so they can contribute to decision-making in parks and open spaces.**
- **Support volunteers to access funding.**



Delivering this plan

The implementation of the Volunteer Action Plan will be overseen by the City of Edinburgh Council in collaboration with key stakeholders, including community organisations, environmental groups, and educational institutions.

The first 5 years of the Action Plan lays the foundation for long-term environmental and community wellbeing, ensuring that Edinburgh's open spaces remain a vital resource for generations to come.

As a dynamic document, the Action plan will remain adaptable, enabling us to respond to new developments in the national volunteering landscape, as well as emerging operational needs within the organisation. After 5 years, the Plan will be reviewed with new actions set for the following 5 years.

We sincerely thank all the individuals and partners who have shared with us their time, creativity, knowledge, and energy.

Key indicators of success will include:



Volunteer engagement: Increasing the number of active volunteers and ensuring high levels of satisfaction.

Community impact: Increasing engagement in events and activities, emphasising user participation and the potential health and wellbeing benefits associated with the use of parks and open spaces.

Environmental benefits: Enhancing biodiversity, reducing litter, and improving the overall quality of our greenspaces.

Volunteer Development: Providing training and opportunities for volunteers to develop their skills and knowledge.

By monitoring these outcomes, we will ensure that our volunteer programmes continue to deliver meaningful benefits for Edinburgh's people, parks, open spaces and communities.

Edinburgh Parks and Open Space Volunteer Action Plan

(2025-2030)

This Volunteer Action Plan (2025–2030) lays the foundation for a thriving volunteer culture in Edinburgh, enhancing individual lives and delivering lasting benefits for the city. It builds on existing programmes, introducing fresh initiatives that reflect emerging priorities and opportunities. It outlines the strategic objectives and actions required to strengthen and expand volunteer engagement within Edinburgh's public parks and open spaces. It focuses on recognising the contributions of volunteers, diversifying the volunteer base, fostering inclusivity, and empowering communities to take active ownership of their local environment.

Goals

Expand Volunteer Participation: Increase the number and diversity of volunteers by 25% by 2030.

Enhance Volunteer Experience: Provide robust training, support, and recognition programmes.

Strengthen Community Engagement: Build partnerships with local organisations to create inclusive volunteer opportunities.

Measure and Demonstrate Impact: Develop metrics to evaluate and communicate volunteer contributions effectively.

Support Priority Areas: Align volunteer activities with city priorities, including biodiversity, health, and social inclusion.

This action plan supports the Council's vision for a greener, more inclusive Edinburgh. It aligns with sustainability goals and efforts to improve mental and physical wellbeing through active citizenship. Importantly, this action plan is a core component of the Edinburgh Thriving Greenspaces Strategy 2050, which envisions a future where Edinburgh's parks and open spaces are vibrant, resilient, and accessible to all. By contributing to the overarching goals of the 2050 strategy, this plan lays the foundation for long-term environmental and community wellbeing, ensuring that parks and open spaces remain a vital resource for generations to come.

Edinburgh Parks and Open Space Volunteer Action Plan 2025 - 2030

ID	Objective				
	Specific Action/ Milestones	Measurement	Relevant/Why	When	Status
1	Laying strong foundation				
1.1	Appoint an Officer for volunteer coordination.	Officer enabled act as volunteer coordinator.	Recognises volunteering as a critical resource for parks and open spaces services and community engagement.	2026	
1.2	Create a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework.	Framework established by 2026. Baseline information gathered by 2025. Regular surveys being undertaken from 2027. Feedback incorporated into strategy updates.	Ensures continuous improvement in volunteer experiences and staff-relationship management. Important for evaluation against outcomes/goals.	2027	
1.3	Introduce a volunteer management system and database, such as an online Volunteer Customer Relationship Management (VCRM) system.	Management and database operational by 2027.	Necessary for efficient volunteer engagement, data tracking, programme management and monitoring.	2027	Work commenced to assess options and gather user requirements.
1.4	Develop clear policies, procedures, and volunteer pathways.	Draft policies published and guidelines for volunteers in place by 2026. Final versions published by 2027.	Provides structure and consistency to the volunteer programme.	2027	
1.5	Simplify sign-up, induction, and onboarding processes.	Temporary processes in place by end of 2025. Online sign-up processes in place by 2027 (linked to introduction with VCRM system).	Simplifies the process of registering and tracking volunteers, improving engagement.	2027	
1.6	Deliver staff training on volunteer coordination.	Training requirements defined by end of 2026. Train relevant staff in volunteer management by 2027, e.g. mediation skills, supporting trainees and apprentices and establishing staff peer support networks.	Builds staff capacity to manage and support volunteers effectively. Provides a platform for staff to share best practices and challenges in volunteer management. Supports volunteer development through skill-building. Ensures groups are equipped to engage inclusively and responsibly with diverse volunteers.	2027	
1.7	Develop necessary tools and resources with relevant training programmes for volunteers.	Equipment available for volunteers. Technical experts within the service (and externally if necessary) to provide advice for volunteers - technical / horticultural advice, biodiversity, invasive species, planning, design advice, etc. Production of suitable training, qualifications and progression path-ways for volunteers, e.g. mental health awareness, survey work, social media, etc.	Ensures volunteers are equipped to carry out tasks safely and efficiently. Supports volunteer development and enhances their skills, safety, and employability.	2027	

Edinburgh Parks and Open Space Volunteer Action Plan 2025 - 2030

ID	Objective				
	Specific Action/ Milestones	Measurement	Relevant/Why	When	Status
2	Growth and Diversification				
2.1	Develop a Communications and Engagement Framework.	Communication and Engagement Framework developed. Positive feedback on communications.	Keeps volunteers informed and connected, reducing misunderstandings and improving satisfaction.	2026	
2.2	Establish staff peer support networks.	Platform established to increase collaboration between staff.	Provides a platform for staff to share best practices and challenges in volunteer management.	2026	
2.3	Develop standardised and flexible volunteering role profiles.	New volunteering opportunities created flexible with timings, regular activities. Positive feedback on new roles.	Provides clarity and transparency for potential and current volunteers regarding expectations. Accommodates diverse lifestyles and increases accessibility for volunteering.	2027	
2.4	Strengthen partnerships with delivery partners, including development of funding model to support their work.	Partnerships established (with agreements if relevant) with delivery partners such as ELGT, TCV, the Caley, Keep Scotland Beautiful, etc. Identify opportunities for partnerships. Funding model in place.	Encourage concerted efforts with multiple resources. City-wide enhancements and opportunities for everyone.	2026	
2.5	Develop an annual city-wide volunteer work programme that can be used for resource planning and recruitment of volunteers.	Develop and establish an annual work programme for the year ahead to be piloted in 2027 and rolled out in 2028.	Offers site-specific volunteer opportunities to maximise engagement. Increases volunteer opportunities and community involvement in parks and open space initiatives. Improves connectivity throughout the city.	2028	
2.6	Launch campaigns to attract diverse, minority and underrepresented groups.	Programme in place. Increased diversity in volunteer demographics.	Builds inclusivity through tailored, culturally relevant activities (e.g., community picnics). Ensures that our parks and open spaces reflect the interests and needs of all groups.	2027	
2.7	Increase corporate volunteering opportunities.	Measures in place to attract more corporate volunteers. Number of corporate volunteering days completed.	Builds partnerships with businesses and provides additional resources for greenspace maintenance.	2027	
2.8	Create family-friendly volunteering activities.	Family participation programme in place. Increased family participation rates.	Encourages intergenerational engagement with greenspaces, fostering a sense of community.	2028	

Edinburgh Parks and Open Space Volunteer Action Plan 2025 - 2030

ID	Objective				
	Specific Action/ Milestones	Measurement	Relevant/Why	When	Status
2.9	Launch a children and young people programme, including establishing a regular working relationship with schools and youth groups around volunteering in parks and open spaces.	20% increase in youth volunteers. 10 schools actively participating.	Encourages youth involvement and builds connections to greenspace.	2028	
3	Empowering our volunteers				
3.1	Provide recognition through events, awards, and impact sharing.	Distribution of recognition items annually. Host an Annual Volunteer Thank You event.	Demonstrates appreciation for volunteers' efforts through tangible recognition.	2025	Complete
3.2	Promote volunteer achievements.	Number of case studies developed. Increased visibility of volunteer contributions.	Encourages participation and showcases the impact of volunteer projects.	2025	Complete
3.3	Support volunteer-led (and Friends groups) initiatives.	Number of successful group events annually.	Empowers local groups to take ownership of parks and open space activities like clean-ups and planting.	2026	
3.4	Work with volunteers/Friends groups to co-design our site work plans and management plans.	Process established for staff and volunteers to work together to prepare work plans 12 months in advance to be piloted by 2026 and rolled out by 2027. Increase in groups involved with the co-production of plans for parks and open spaces from 2026 onwards.	Ensures volunteers feel that they have a strong and active involvement in how parks and open spaces are managed. Volunteers contribute to decision-making processes, increasing transparency and trust.	2026	
3.5	Work closely with the Edinburgh Green Spaces Forum to nurture new groups so they can contribute to decision-making in parks and open spaces.	Increase number of new groups involved with co-production of plans for parks and open spaces from 2026 onwards.	Ensures volunteers feel that they have a strong and active involvement in how parks and open spaces are managed. Volunteers contribute to decision-making processes, increasing transparency and trust.	2027	
3.6	Offer training and skill-building opportunities for volunteers.	Number of training sessions delivered including involvement in citizen science projects.	This will empower individuals, promote personal growth, and strengthen community bonds, all while encouraging sustainable practices. Supports data collection and public education and engagement through activities like biodiversity monitoring.	2027	
3.7	Support volunteers to access funding.	Amount of funding secured by Friends groups.	This will empower volunteers to take action in their spaces.	2027	