

Paper by: Director of Evidence

Subject: An Action Plan for Volunteer Monitoring

Conclusions and Recommendations

The prospect of supplementing our monitoring programmes through greater use of volunteers has received unanimous support across the business. We need to harness this enthusiasm in a professional and structured way so that we can maximise opportunities to become more effective, measure progress and mitigate risks. Directors Team is asked to:

- Support our proposed approach to volunteer monitoring;
- Consider the specific proposals in this paper;
- Endorse the action plan and acknowledge resource implications.

We recommend that the action plan is put in place as soon as possible.

1.0 Background

1.1 Previous Directors papers have illustrated the benefits and challenges of working with volunteers across our monitoring activities. In February Directors indicated that we should do more with volunteers. Specifically we should:

- focus on ideas that supplement rather than replace our core monitoring programme;
- identify the best opportunities, i.e. low cost, low risk monitoring that is not critical but still useful;
- work with or through other organisations;
- make it simple for volunteers to submit data and information.

1.2 Since February we have consulted extensively with Environment Agency staff. There is unanimous support for the expansion of our approach to volunteer monitoring. This is a topic that employees are motivated by, understanding that a dialogue about monitoring and the transaction of environmental information is often the first step in a relationship with groups who eventually take on an active role in delivering wider outcomes.

2.0 The right approach

2.1 Our key principles are:

- We will be opportunistic, utilising the motivations of others rather than imposing our requirements upon volunteers;
- We will be ready to state our requirements if asked, both at national and local scale;
- As far as possible we will work through larger organisations to marshal and manage volunteers on our behalf;

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- Internally, volunteer monitoring initiatives will be locally owned but given a single national focal point so that strategic arrangements can be put in place;
- We will ensure we appropriately resource our role in co-ordinating volunteer monitoring (best estimates suggest that 1 FTE is needed per 30 voluntary groups, assuming each voluntary group nominates a single point of contact);
- We will recognise that behaviours can make or break volunteer monitoring initiatives. We must be gracious, deal with people on an equal footing, describe the role their work will play in achieving environmental improvements and finally, of greatest importance, we will need to show a long-standing commitment to any initiative we become involved in.

3.0 Stating our needs

3.1 We must ensure our data systems and business processes can make use of any information volunteers would like to present to us. Beyond this opportunistic approach we must be ready to state our priorities. In consultation with a wide range of teams from across the organisation the following areas stand out as priorities in supplementing our monitoring programmes:

- Knowledge of local environmental issues that may prevent our water bodies from meeting water quality and ecological targets;
- Very local, high resolution information on the effectiveness of specific environmental improvements in specific localities;
- Rainfall and flow information to enhance our flood forecasting ability for steep, rapid-response catchments.

3.2 To help us meet these priorities a number of specific proposals have been put forward. These are:

- a) Work with volunteers to undertake catchment walkovers across England and Wales. A pilot is currently taking place as part of Northern Ambition.
- b) Develop a software application akin to the Plant Tracker tool (<http://planttracker.naturelocator.org/>) that will allow volunteers to instantly upload their findings, across a range of topics, to our data systems. A prototype is currently being developed by the CIS Innovations and Architecture team.
- c) Enhance relationships with angling clubs across the country so that we can gather their information on fish populations ('Matchcatch') at localities that we find difficult to survey, such as large and slow flowing rivers.
- d) Work with Flood Wardens and local communities in rapid response catchments to measure rainfall, record water levels on stage boards, report build-up of debris on trash screens and other operationally relevant information.
- e) In conjunction with the Met Office we increase the number of rainfall observers and expand the use of their Weather Observations Website to collect other useful climatic information <http://wow.metoffice.gov.uk/>. Volunteers already have a significant role in the delivery of storage rainfall data and there are opportunities to expand our use of volunteers in the measurement of rainfall, snow depth and surface water depth.
- f) Extend the use of Quick Response Codes (QRC) on Environment Agency assets so the public can report the specific locality of a visible environmental issue by scanning the QRC with smart phones.

4.0 The Action Plan

4.1 In developing this plan we have discussed all aspects of volunteer monitoring with experienced experts inside and outside of the organisation. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) have a great deal of experience in the use of volunteers and they've been particularly helpful in guiding our approach. The action plan includes three key aims:

1. Develop a governance and support framework to enable the expansion of volunteer monitoring;
2. Strengthen data and business processes that make it easy for volunteers to submit data and information;
3. Improve and expand existing volunteer monitoring schemes, and promote and pilot the best new ideas.

4.2 The proposals have been generated from a number of ideas that have been suggested by our staff. The key tasks associated with the implementation of these aims are listed in chronological order in a three year plan, attached as Appendix 1.

5.0 Impact on customers

5.1 Our third sector customer base is likely to welcome a plan to improve our work with volunteers. We will be perceived as being more open, approachable and inclusive.

6.0 Implications for Wales

6.1 There is similar potential to expand volunteering across Environment Agency Wales. Progressing volunteering could contribute to a number of the Welsh Government objectives, such as supporting the development of green volunteering, (Action 53 WG Environment Strategy Action Plan).

7.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 The prospect of supplement our monitoring programmes through greater use of volunteers has received unanimous support across the business. We need to harness this enthusiasm in a professional and structured way so that we can maximise opportunities to become more effective, measure progress and mitigate risks.

7.2 We recommend that the action plan is put in place as soon as possible.

