



# 'My motivation kind of grew with the trees' – experiences of woodland volunteers in Great Britain

There are many personal, social, and environmental benefits associated with woodland volunteering, so there is value in understanding how volunteers can be recruited and retained. This study explored the experiences of woodland volunteers, including: their motivations for volunteering; the personal benefits they gain; factors that enable them to volunteer; the barriers to volunteering they or others may face; and opportunities for encouraging people to volunteer. Understanding of these factors provides insights for both policymakers and volunteer organisations into how more people might be supported to start or continue volunteering.

## Methodology

Interviews were conducted with 17 volunteers from woodland-based volunteering groups in England, Wales, and Scotland. Volunteers told us they have participated in a variety of activities as part of their role, including: tree planting, tree felling, pathway creation and clearance, charcoal making, dry-stone walling, biodiversity monitoring, and committee membership.

## What motivates people to volunteer in woodlands?

Results showed volunteers were motivated to start and continue volunteering by multiple, interacting factors. A [framework](#) of eight motivation types was used to structure interviewees' responses, as shown in the table below. Motivations are listed in order from those most to least frequently mentioned by interviewees.

Motivation type	Description of motivation type
<b>Environmental</b>	To positively contribute towards local or global environmental issues, such as nature recovery, or climate change, and to see the woodland progress over time.
<b>Health and wellbeing</b>	To improve their physical or mental health, to spend time outdoors and connect with nature, to feel they are doing something purposeful, or to spend their time doing something that they enjoy.
<b>Project organisation</b>	Continue to volunteer because of factors relating to the organisation and management of the groups, such as feeling welcomed, receiving positive feedback, feeling they are making an impact, and not being allocated monotonous tasks.
<b>Community-based</b>	To improve the woodlands for the benefit of others in their local community, or to improve the area they live in, or for their own future recreational use.
<b>Learning-based</b>	To learn new knowledge, and to gain new skills or enhance existing ones. It also in some instances allows participants to contribute to science.
<b>Social</b>	To meet new people, socialise with likeminded others, or to spend time with friends and family.
<b>Career-based</b>	To gain experience related to their desired career.
<b>Personal values and esteem</b>	Volunteer because it is important to them. It makes them feel part of something, that they are leaving a legacy, that they have ownership over something. It also provides them with a sense of self-worth and pride.

We spoke to volunteers of different ages from groups in Gair Wood in Leeds, Craig Gwladus Woods in Neath Port Talbot, Leadburn Community Woodland in the Scottish Borders, as well as one participant from the Arnside and Silverdale National Landscape near Lancaster.

'That was the main thing, just contributing to the general attempt by these organisations to increase biodiversity and maintain what we have already got.'  
– Participant K (male, aged 55–64, on [motivations](#))

'When I am feeling low, it is something that I do that is purposeful and I can switch off from everything else.'  
– Participant J (female, aged 55–64, on [motivations](#))

## What personal benefits are gained from volunteering?

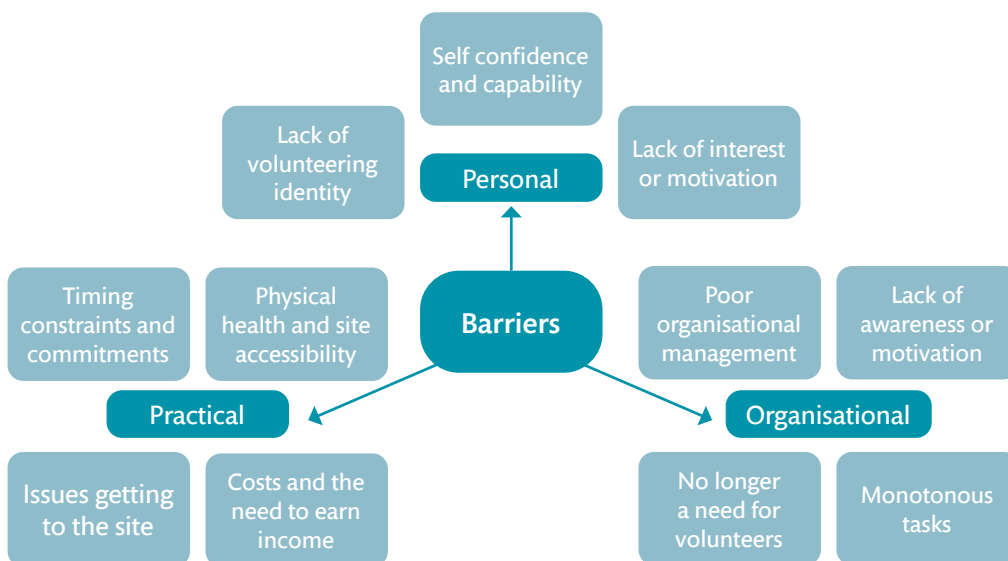
Participants described the personal benefits they gained from volunteering in woodlands. While these often aligned with motivations, they differed from motivations in that they are not the reasons participants initially decided to volunteer, but are the gains they received from doing so.

- **Physical health benefits** – Volunteering activities are often physically demanding (e.g. digging holes, moving debris) and are perceived as a good way to keep fit.
- **Mental health benefits** – Volunteering is something they enjoy and provides a sense of purpose and achievement. It can provide an escape from challenging life circumstances and offers a restorative sanctuary to recover from stress and anxiety. The woodland environment also facilitates connections to nature.
- **Social benefits** – The sessions allow volunteers to meet and interact with likeminded people who share similar values and help build a sense of belonging. Volunteers interact with people of different ages and backgrounds, providing opportunities to view life through different perspectives.
- **Learning-based benefits** – Volunteering in woodlands provides opportunities for self-development through learning new knowledge about the natural environment, or by gaining new skills. Having knowledgeable organisers and other volunteers with their own skillsets was seen to help support this.

'I call it my green gym, I would rather do that than join a gym and be pounding away on a running machine somewhere so, yes, I enjoy the physical aspect of it because I think it is good for my fitness.' – Participant I (female, aged 65+, on physical health benefits)

## What barriers to volunteering do people face?

The figure below summarises the barriers volunteers faced in becoming a volunteer, issues that made it difficult for them to continue, and factors that might cause them to stop volunteering in the future. There were three main types of barriers, namely: personal, practical, and organisational.



'I always worry about being in groups, I am quite introverted. I do not particularly like being in large groups so, I was not sure what to expect.' – Participant N (female, aged 35–44, on barriers)

## How might volunteers be better recruited and retained?

The motivations, benefits, and barriers outlined above can inform methods for increasing the recruitment and retention of woodland volunteers. The suggestions below can be valuable tools for organisations concerned with providing volunteering opportunities in woodland settings and for policymakers designing interventions to encourage more volunteering.

### Volunteer recruitment

- **Local motivations** – Finding out what is important to local people and which of the opportunities offered by the volunteer organisation appeal to potential volunteers can help steer the focus of marketing materials.
- **Awareness raising** – Better promotion of woodland volunteering opportunities can raise awareness of them and lead to greater involvement. Advertising the benefits of volunteering by highlighting the personal gains that can be achieved can also be useful.
- **Taster sessions** – Provision of taster sessions could help prospective volunteers experience the role without making formal commitments and help to increase self-confidence and perceptions of their own capability.
- **Involvement of different groups in the community** – Volunteer organisations could seek to engage different groups, such as corporate volunteer groups and families, to maximise the numbers of people taking part. Thought should also be given to including tasks that are possible for those with limited mobility or particular accessibility issues.

### Volunteer retention

- **Group motivations** – Understanding the motivations of existing volunteers also allows volunteer organisations to provide feedback on the work being done and the impact made, based on issues important to the volunteers themselves. This is particularly relevant to woodlands where development and change is not always immediately noticeable.
- **Demonstrate strong project management** – Having well-organised, experienced, and knowledgeable group leaders helps volunteers feel they are contributing to something of importance and makes their experience more enjoyable.
- **Avoid volunteer burnout** – Ensuring volunteers continue to enjoy their role helps with retention. For example, avoiding monotonous or onerous tasks, finding regular times for sessions that suit volunteers, not burdening volunteers with unwanted responsibilities, and taking time for breaks can all help.
- **Provide training opportunities** – Allowing volunteers to self-develop and continue to feel they are learning through provision of training can help to maintain interest and enjoyment.

Many of the findings reported here reinforce existing understanding of the challenges faced by organisations and policymakers seeking to increase volunteering. These findings serve to update and reiterate the key points and add value for those concerned specifically with volunteering in relation to trees, woods, and forests.



Illustrative image: woodland volunteers

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To find out more about this and related research, go to:  
[Programme 3 - Societal benefits of trees, woods, and forests](#)

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