**Volunteer Coordinators’ Forum**

**Key Topic: Volunteer Conflict**

Wednesday 28th June 2023

Location: Downlands Partnership, Old Lodge Farm

Hosted by: Sean Grufferty & Damien Laing

We started with a tour of the farm. There is further information in the attached brochure and presentation.

**Topic: Volunteer conflict**

The notes have been compiled from the talk by Sean Grufferty on his experience and the extra tips and case studies given by the group present in subsequent discussion.

**Start from recruitment**

· In your volunteer advert make it clear and simple what’s expected

· Be honest about what the role entails so they don’t think it’s just the fun bits.

· Advertise in the best places for the role to get the most suitable people.

· Recruit well, have a proper interview/chat and induction to get a feel for the volunteer from the beginning and a chance to set clear expectations.

· Volunteers like to know there are boundaries – the farm has an A4 sheet with a Volunteer Promise outlining rights and responsibilities, the duties of the farm and of the volunteer and what both can expect of the other, and a Volunteer Policy.

· When training volunteers up, choose the right people e.g. for task leadership volunteers need diplomatic people who are calm, not combative or feisty.

**Start as you mean to go on**

· It is best to be clear right from the start on expectations between the organisation and the volunteer and what both need to deliver and be accountable for. It is a two-way understanding so the organisation must hold to it as well.

· Examples of volunteer promised and policy attached from Surrey County Council.

· Make yourself easily accessible e.g. they have walkie talkies for contact on the farm.

· Get to know volunteers early on. If you know them and there is a problem you can then talk to them, informally at first, to make them aware.

**Choose the right role for them**

· Set jobs to suit people.

· Don’t ask them to do something out of their comfort zone.

· Listen to them and know what peoples' strengths are to give them appropriate tasks, that helps stop them becoming stressed.

· Giving people a mix of jobs tends to keep them happy, not just boring jobs.

· If someone is a problem doing one job but they are a good volunteer then move them to another task.

· People tend to get combative if stressed – if so can pair them with someone more laid back.

**Keeping all your volunteers happy**

· The view tends to be that if someone is a volunteer you are beholden to them and desperate to keep them, therefore it should all be about them, which is not true.

· Let them go if it isn’t working, sometimes it’s also kinder to the volunteer to help them be released onto something they will enjoy more.

· Important to keep the best atmosphere and culture amongst your volunteers.

· If you have any tension, new volunteers may pick up on it and it can sour it for everyone.

· Hard at the start to get the right group of volunteers, you want to preserve this. The end outcome is much better than burying your head in the sand.

· Can get new volunteers who are better at the role required.

· A happy atmosphere tends to help any tension fizzle out quickly.

· Remember how you react influences others so stay calm

· Best to be preventative.

· No time for volunteer on volunteer conflicts so best to nip it in the bud before things become an issue.

**Tips to help stay on track**

· If you sort out problems at the start then you keep a good atmosphere and other volunteers (particularly new ones) will feel happy and stay with you.

· Give people a trial period then if they aren't suitable can say the trial jobs are finished, thanks for your time etc

· The effect is worse in small groups (3-4), it tends to get 'ironed out' in larger numbers (e.g. 10), people tend to mellow.

**If volunteer starts making demands or thinks they have more experience than you**

· Remember you are paid staff / more senior

· Protect yourself

· Can use humour

· Can say “thank you” and not do anything with the demands

· Keep your story consistent

· Keep written records

· If a case of experience and knowledge, enlist the help of other experienced professionals to back you up.

· Try to find a way forward

· Stay calm

· Try not to take things personally.

**When a problem arises**

· Something becomes a problem when it starts affecting others (animals or people’s welfare and experience).

· Step in if this is the case.

· If conflict arises try to diffuse the situation by keeping it informal, light hearted and making jokes.

· Separate them out onto another job.

· If there are complaints about someone's behaviour, one approach is to start by leaving out the appropriate policy for everyone to read so that it’s not targeted and reminds everyone of expectations. Doesn’t penalise one individual or single them out. They should take the hint.

· If that doesn't work then have a one-to-one informal conversation – informal warning. Highlight the issue and who it affects.

· Conversations first and reminding of all the policies in the contract and volunteer promise.