

Anna Scott, Waste Services Manager at Keep Britain Tidy, considers the best way of engaging with communities about waste reduction: volunteer scheme or paid outreach officer?

Community engagement

Keep Britain Tidy has more than seven years of experience of managing waste volunteer schemes in partnership with local authorities. These schemes utilise volunteers to encourage and support waste reduction, reuse and recycling in their communities by running roadshows and delivering talks and workshops to community groups and schools.

Our current schemes include the Cheshire Waste Reduction Volunteers (managed in partnership with Cheshire West & Chester Council and Cheshire East Council/Ansa Environmental Services) and the Surrey Green Network (managed in partnership with Surrey County Council). We have also managed the Essex Waste Busters (with Essex County Council), the North Yorkshire Rotters (with North Yorkshire County Council) and supported the Leicestershire Waste Action Volunteers managed by Leicestershire County Council.

Volunteers offer a number of benefits: they can be trusted voices who can deliver messages in a sensitive and informed way, particularly important where there are cultural barriers to sustainable waste behaviours. Volunteers are generally driven by their passion to help others waste less; by building their capacity, they can become highly effective in their formal volunteering activity, and also in their own sphere by influencing family, friends and colleagues.

Our longest-running scheme

is the Cheshire Waste Reduction Volunteers programme. The WRVs (pronounced 'wervs') are a group of Cheshire residents who encourage others to waste less by promoting home composting and Love Food Hate Waste messages. Since the scheme took on its current form in 2010, we have trained more than 110 volunteers who have donated in over 4,500 hours of their time, attending around 700 community events. Our volunteers have engaged with around 40,000 residents about waste reduction.

All activity is managed by a 0.6 FTE Project Coordinator based in Cheshire, who recruits, trains and manages the volunteers. The Cheshire scheme, like all our waste volunteer schemes, is designed to supplement, not replace, community outreach activity by paid officers. However, the success of this scheme, and the reality of reduced local authority waste management budgets for community outreach has led the Keep Britain Tidy team to ponder two questions: can the reach of a waste volunteer scheme surpass that of an equivalent community outreach officer? And if so, can volunteer schemes effectively replace officer-led community outreach work?

In 2015/16, the Cheshire scheme worked with a pool of around 50 active volunteers with a handful of extremely active volunteers. They donated more than 800 hours of their time attending almost 170 events. In total, they engaged with more than 10,000 residents about



Community volunteers Jennifer, Patti and Bob

waste reduction. This equates to an average of over 15 volunteer hours, around three events and over 205 residents engaged per week; 64 residents were engaged per event. What if the 0.6 FTE Project Coordinator delivered outreach activity directly as opposed to delivering outreach work through volunteers? It's unlikely that they could attend as many as three events and engage with as many as 192 residents in their three-day working week – particularly as there may be simultaneous outreach opportunities at weekend community events. Therefore, with a large pool of volunteers (including a core of very committed individuals) alongside a wide variety of community outreach opportunities, it is evident that the reach of volunteers can surpass the reach of an equivalent outreach officer.

Whether a volunteer scheme can effectively replace officer-

led community outreach work is less clear. It takes a number of years to recruit a large number of active volunteers who are fully confident to take waste reduction messages out into their communities. This makes the initial years of a waste volunteer scheme an investment in this approach. Furthermore, while a number of extremely active volunteers can be central to the success of a scheme, should they choose to leave, then reach is likely to be reduced. Lastly, volunteer schemes cannot always keep on growing – number of volunteers, outreach opportunities and the capacity of the officer managing the volunteers are all limiting factors. Nonetheless, when a local authority makes a long-term commitment to the use of volunteers then this can lead to engagement with many more residents about sustainable waste behaviours than would otherwise be reached.

FURTHER INFORMATION >>

For more on the volunteer schemes, please contact Anna Scott on **020 7549 0323** or email anna.scott@keepbritaintidy.org