

<b>Name of project/group</b>
Waterways Action Squad
<b>Type of project</b>
Social Action
<b>Location</b>
North West England
<b>What was involved</b> June 2009-June 2011 (1 <sup>st</sup> stage; the project is looking to expand after June)
<p>The 'Waterways Action Squad' programme was funded by 'v' (the National Young Volunteers Service) and the Bank of America through its Match Fund Programme pairing corporate partners with voluntary organisations. The Bank of America is supporting the Action Squad as part of its global investment in organisations and initiatives involved with environmental issues. 'v' and the Bank provide the funding for the project (50% each), while British Waterways and The Waterways Trust are the delivery partners. In addition, local and regional partnerships have been formed with a large number of organisations, such as Lancashire Wildlife Trust and the National Community Boats Association (NCBA).</p> <p>The project set out to make a difference to people's lives through the conservation and promotion of the North West's canals and rivers. The aims of the project were to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop the capacity of British Waterways and The Waterways Trust to increase youth involvement in waterways;</li> <li>• improve young people's attitudes towards waterways;</li> <li>• make the waterway environment better for wildlife and more attractive and welcoming for people.</li> </ul> <p>The project has been running since June 2009, and is ongoing until June 2011.</p>
<b>Achievements</b>
<p>The project arose, in part, from a perception that young people were under-represented' in volunteering in the area. It is believed, that although young volunteering may have increased without the project, it would have been at a much slower rate, and that youth engagement is now starting to become 'embedded' within both organisations due to the project.</p> <p>The project has engaged with over 900 young volunteers. Those involved have acquired many new skills and benefits including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• traditional crafts skills: projects included re-laying hedgerows using traditional techniques, dry stone walling, roses and castles painting workshops and volunteering with the Horseboating Society to crew a traditional horse-drawn barge.</li> <li>• IT and business skills: office-based volunteers have learnt computer skills, and some have earned NVQ IT or Business qualifications as part of their work. Some volunteers act as 'Waterways Ambassadors' in roles alongside the project team to help with project development work such as media, administration, public relations, marketing, recruitment, event planning and financial operations. Ambassadors also gain leadership-level experience with clear progression routes.</li> <li>• Art projects – murals along the Shropshire Union Canal and Leeds/Liverpool Canal, willow installations at the National Waterways Museum and Crewe.</li> <li>• interpersonal skills such as team-building, confidence.</li> <li>• music skills (workshops writing pieces to celebrate the waterways).</li> </ul> <p>Formal awards and accreditation are available for the volunteers including vAwards, Youth Achievement Awards, John Muir Award, AQAs in dry-stone walling and certificates in First Aid and Water Safety Training. Training and ongoing support is also available for staff and existing volunteers who are interested in supporting young people.</p>

Benefits to the historic environment have so far included the regeneration of hedgerows using traditional techniques, and dry stone walling. The team is currently planning a project where young people will receive training in a wide range of heritage skills along waterways in the North West. The programme is designed to use the heritage focus to improve the waterways while encouraging personal development and employability amongst the young participants.

Local waterway areas have benefited from environmental improvements such as visual art, cleaning up litter and hedgerow planting. The local communities have shown interest in events including the launch party. Young people have also mentioned that they feel more involved with their communities.

Reports of the project work can be found on the WAS website; the beneficial experiences and skills learnt by volunteers are evidenced by comments posted on the website by volunteers (see <http://waterwaysactionsquad.com/have-your-say>). Monitoring and evaluation have been integral from the outset, with interviews with young people prior to the start of the project assessing their perceptions of waterways, regular reviews and exit interviews with volunteers. A formal evaluation is underway currently.



### Future plans

The project has always been viewed as a model and pilot for a wider project. The Waterways Action Squad are currently applying for further funding to continue the project and extend activities outside the North West (the current funding ends in June 2011), working with British Waterways and other key partners. Birmingham and London are possible future target areas.

The second draft of the *Youth Engagement Strategy for waterways* was completed in January 2011, 'developed as a result of extensive consultation with young people, staff and volunteers, local authority and various waterways organisations. The focus being a 'future for youth engagement beyond the life of *Waterways Action Squad*'. Through its two key strands (youth development and infrastructure development), this will provide a framework for staff and volunteers to involve young people.

Members of the project team have spoken at many events, to share their experiences and discuss approaches. Information will also be disseminated via case studies, to communicate the project and the lessons it has learnt.

### Lessons Learnt

- *Challenge perceptions about youth volunteering:* During the early stages of the project, there were some concerns with regards to the perception of young people within organisations which did not recognise the benefit. However, these views have now changed, and many of the same organisations are now requesting the assistance of the young volunteers, having seen the standard of work being carried out.
- *Changing young peoples' attitudes to waterways* –The project had to find the 'hook' to

engage young people, who may not have thought the project was relevant to them – This was done through demonstrating the wide range of opportunities available through the waterways and diversifying beyond a perhaps common misconception of waterways volunteers as ‘litter pickers’.

- *With more, more can be done:* A major challenge for the project was resources in terms of personnel available to support young people and projects – the project team consists of three individuals, so the project’s scope necessarily had to be compact, focusing on Liverpool, Ellesmere Port and Chester for its first phase, and extending to include Manchester, as well as parts of Lancashire and Cheshire for the second. It was felt that perhaps more could have been achieved were more capacity, with the project making more partnerships with local volunteering groups.

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