

Case Study

Youth Ambassador Volunteers

Background

The South Downs National Park (SDNP) has a statutory duty to “promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the National Park by the public.” The National Park should be a Park for all to enjoy.

Volunteering is an important way to raise awareness about the SDNP purposes and projects in both local communities and the wider society.

The South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA) Volunteer Development Strategy (2018) identified a need to diversify volunteering opportunities to appeal to a broader cross-section of society.

Analysis of volunteer data revealed that less than 4% of SDNPA volunteers were aged between 16-25, whereas over 70% were aged 55-74.

Research into different methods of engagement was then undertaken to help understand why youth participation was so low.

Guidance for how to involve young people in a meaningful way is set out in the EUROPARC Youth Manifesto, launched in September 2018. The Youth Manifesto focuses on inequalities which young people suffer from disproportionately, that may have deep socio-economic and environmental impacts in future.



The project

The Youth Ambassador volunteer role was piloted between October 2018 and December 2019.

An approach was taken which followed methods already applied by organisations who specialise in environmental youth engagement. This included the work of youth charities such as *Action for Conservation* who operate a Youth Ambassador programme to help develop their projects for young people.

For the SDNPA, the intention was simply to give young people a clear voice without attempting to control their involvement and fit them into a pre-existing role within the Authority. The ideas and direction had to be steered by young people. This was also in the spirit of the EUROPARC Youth Manifesto, which was being explored by protected landscape organisations across Europe at the time.

Supported by the Volunteer Development Officer, two volunteers aged 16-25 residing within the National Park were given the opportunity to make their views heard on how the South Downs could be made more accessible to young people.

Kirsty Ferris and Cameron Macdonald are both volunteers registered with the South Downs Volunteer Ranger Service. They were asked what they felt the role could do, what areas needed more focus and how to become more appealing and accountable to young people. The Youth Ambassadors decided on tasks they wanted to do including: social media takeovers to promote microvolunteering, creating content alongside the Communications team, and giving talks at SDNPA all-staff events, National Park partner conferences, and the highlight – an academic symposium on young people and nature at Brighton University.

“I've seen differences in the fact that people want to know our perspectives on certain matters. We're not here to shout and cry, we're here to work together as a community.”

Cameron Macdonald, Youth Ambassador

The outcome

First and foremost the Youth Ambassadors have established a youth voice within the National Park and inspired a desire for change.

The progress made by Kirsty and Cameron has led to a distinct change of perspective for SDNPA staff. Rangers have become key advocates for youth involvement through their leading of Youth Action days and soft mentoring of young people. Kirsty Ferris spoke at a Policy and Resources committee meeting in September 2019, leading to calls for a young person to potentially join Members in some capacity. This has been championed by Chief Executive, Trevor Beattie. The areas most impacted are:

- Volunteering – South Downs Youth Action has been created, a new National Park-wide youth project
- Comms – Youth Ambassadors have been given the chance to ‘take over’ social media channels to promote the views of young people; they also contribute articles in the Authority’s digital and print media
- Policy – Youth Ambassadors are being considered as part of plans to involve young people in decision-making at a higher level in the organisation

The future

There is a demand for youth volunteering opportunities within the South Downs National Park from people across the south-east of England.

The intention is to expand our Youth Action programme to incorporate more Youth Ambassadors from a broader social and geographical area.

SDNPA will also support partner organisations in the National Park to deliver Youth Action days as part of our larger programme.

To make the National Park’s volunteer community more diverse there must be investment in targeted roles and activities for young people.

There is a thirst at board-level within National Parks to see more meaningful youth representation and decision-making. The plan is to continue to explore ways for young people to have a role in this process without dampening the youth voice.

For more information about volunteering in the South Downs National Park, please visit www.southdowns.gov.uk/volunteering

The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP) 2020–25 sets out a shared vision for how we all would like the National Park to be in the future. It includes 10 long-term outcomes, and provides a framework for communities, landowners, charities, businesses and public bodies to work together to make this vision and these outcomes a reality.

This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:

Outcome 8.1: *To increase and diversify volunteering opportunities that support the National Park.*

<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/partnership-management-plan/>

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