

Volunteer Q&A with North West Regional Team

Held on: 24th September 2020

Trust colleagues in attendance:

Julie Sharman (Chief Operating Officer), Daniel Greenhalgh (Regional Director), Stephen Bergquist (Community Engagement Manager), Stephen Ballard (Regional Operations Manager), Angela Parkinson-Green (Area Operations Manager(AOM): Lancaster Canal), David Wilkinson (Skills & Learning Co-ordinator) Steve O'Sullivan (Volunteer Development Co-ordinator), Alice Kay (Volunteer Development Co-ordinator) Elizabeth Mann (Volunteer Development Co-ordinator) and Beth Cropper (Volunteer Development Co-ordinator)

Volunteers: 36 in attendance

Questions

Q: Why have communications gone in a backward direction since re-organisation took place?

A: It is disappointing to hear the general feedback on communication and it will improve going forward. We will be issuing newsletters and there will be local meetings organised by local teams. We will be running regular forums (online, at the moment) and we believe all these measures will improve communications.

Q: Volunteers do not get a response from managers at Northwich.

A: We apologise for this and our colleagues should always be replying to volunteers and we can get better at this.

Q: Issues raised with Northgate locks – anti-social behaviour, maintenance issues and volunteers being kept out of the loop.

A: Paul Reynolds is on secondment to this area as Area Operations Manager and is looking forward to working with volunteers and will be increasing communications with volunteers.

Q: Northgate locks not being manned means that boaters do not want to use it.

Post the Q&A session Daniel has been to site and posed these specific questions on Northgate Locks to Paul Reynolds (Area Operations Manager). The challenge here is regarding the availability of welfare for use by our colleagues and the volunteers and the need to share facilities. Paul is reviewing the welfare provision and will update the volunteers with plans going forward.

Paul has plans to get a Green Flag in this area and would welcome volunteer support to help achieve this.

Q: With the new restrictions and the potential covid wider second lockdown what are CRT views going forward?

A: We don't know exactly what is going to happen and when or where, but we will be agile enough to follow any new government guidance and implement whatever measures are necessary. There were many lessons learned from the initial lockdown that we have reacted to and learnt from. There are also opportunities being presented such as government funding for job creation schemes, which we will look to engage with. We have already secured funding from Sport England in the North West to work in Pennine Lancashire on the Tackling Inequalities Fund.

Q: My Adoption Group's work parties used to be supported by a Volunteer Team Leader. In the last year this has changed so we now only see operatives, who then often have other work to go and do. I appreciate this gives CRT more flexibility, but does it not mean you are missing out on presenting the face of CRT to the vols, who are all established within the local community? I am the only one who now deals directly with any CRT "volunteer person".

A: We are pleased that our wider teams are working with and alongside volunteers, but we acknowledge that our engagement and "visibility" with Partner Group could be better.

Q: Can we see the pre-submitted questions please?

A: All questions and answers are presented in this document.

Q: Is there a strategy for getting more boat traffic to the Ellesmere Port Boat Museum?

A: We did have plans to ensure a successful Easter Boat Gathering at the museum, but this was cancelled as we were in lockdown throughout that period. Ani Sutton is now the Destinations and Attractions Manager with overall management of the museum and Paul Reynolds has been seconded to the Area Operations Manager role and they will be working together with our volunteers and boating stakeholders to ensure a better experience for boaters on this section of the Shropshire Union Canal. We will get more boat traffic if we provide a better experience such as clearance of aquatic weed for example. In terms of getting more people to the museum, £1.1 million funding has been secured for a towpath upgrade between Chester and Ellesmere Port which means better access for all.

Q: Why can't CRT resolve the issues that are preventing lock keeping at Bunbury & Northgate? Mike expanded saying there are issues at the welfare facilities in Bunbury that have been going on for years. Lock Keepers have been using facilities at the Anglo-Welsh building before lockdown and Mike isn't sure why they can't do this now.

A: Post the Q&A session Daniel has been to site and posed these specific questions on Bunbury to Paul Reynolds (Area Operations Manager), Anglo-Welsh and other Trust

colleagues. We are in discussions with Anglo-Welsh and Trust colleagues to try and resolve this long-standing issue and we will update the volunteers with plans going forward.

A suggestion was given for how to improve volunteer communications from an example that used to happen where he volunteered: volunteer manager to ring round all the volunteers beforehand to check they are available for upcoming session.

Q: The Trust is carrying out a Volunteer communication audit at the end of the month. Can you and the VDCs build further on that?

A: The Trust is looking at the processes behind volunteering; how we enter data and trying to improve on the data we enter into our database for volunteering. We need to ensure the whole volunteer journey is captured in our records from recruitment to training to logging hours and more.

Q: Currently volunteers are represented through their reps on the Council - maybe there should be a channel to the two reps?

A: We will take this up with Ed Moss to try and get visibility of how volunteers can do this.

Q: There are different levels to communication. Are we talking within "local" teams, regional areas then the wider organisation?

A: Some of the national volunteering communications have received good feedback, such as the volunteer update emails, volunteer Q&A's and webinar events. We agree local communication is vital and are trying to address this via the local Q&A's, newsletter, and local volunteer meetings.

Q: Can you bear in mind the role of Adoption Groups, and the fact that only the leader will normally get info. That leader needs a solid, "single point of contact" which I've had to fight for in my case.

A: We do want volunteers to work with all our colleagues, but we also understand that a single point of contact does provide consistency. We believe issues like this can be addressed and overcome via the local meetings.

Q: I am interested in the comment about the communications problems arising from us not having Trust e-mail addresses. This has been raised in several volunteers' webinars recently - e.g. access to SCADA data.

A: We have had this feedback a number of times and will pick it up with Ed Moss.

Q: Again, the question of volunteers replacing paid staff is doing the rounds on social media etc. Any advice on how to respond to any customers/staff/public who raise this? Particularly when we are likely to see the loss of some seasonal roles at the very least.

A: Volunteers are vital to the work we do and we value their contribution. We do not replace full time colleagues with volunteers, but we must get more and more done across the

network and are looking to grow our volunteer numbers whilst reducing our reliance on paid seasonal staff

Q: How are we going to change the profile of the volunteers, particularly decrease the age profile and change the hair colour, and expand the interest by BAME communities?

A: We need more diversity across our whole workforce, from the bank to the office – this is something we acknowledge. We have made some progress to increase our diversity at the Trust, working with LGBT Foundation in Manchester for example, but we can do more.

Daniel asked for ideas on increasing diversity.

Q: Giving young people more autonomy to plan volunteering is something we would like to see.

A: We have done some great youth engagement work such as the Desmond Family Canoe Trail project on the Leeds & Liverpool Canal and we work with young people in our Strategic Programmes – but we can do more on this front.

Q: Is it possible to make travelling along the Manchester Ship Canal to the Weaver easier, thus creating a ring?

A: Steve Maguire (Area Operations Manager) will be in touch with Ian to discuss this further.

Q: Weed management seems to be a common theme this year across the network and is certainly a common complaint from boaters.

A: We have had the ‘perfect storm’ of great weather in early spring and no boat movement that has led to there being a considerable weed problem across the country. Operationally we now have 3 weed boats tackling the build-up of weed across the North West. We will also have a spraying regime that starts now and then will be repeated in April and next September to keep weed down.

There are opportunities for volunteers to be trained to assist with weed removal, please get in touch if you are interested in this.

Q: What welfare facilities are required at locks? How could these be met in more rural settings? Ian expanded when asked: Some sites are closed. Why has it changed? Is there a minimum requirement in terms of welfare needed to do the job?

A: We do have a mandatory standard that details what welfare provision should be provided for colleagues and volunteers. Since COVID-19 all lock sites that are manned by colleagues and volunteers should have been risk assessed with COVID safety guidance incorporated. We will be reviewing this over the winter and in accordance with any changes to guidance.

Q: Will Liz Mann have an active part in the volunteer audit at the museum?

A: Yes, as will all the Volunteer Development Co-ordinators (VDCs) across the region.

Comment: GDPR is very limiting, maybe we need to have groups, which C&RT and the group allow joint access, this may be a route which fits within GDPR

Unanswered & Pre-submitted questions with feedback (similar questions grouped into themes)

Q: Is there any feedback to volunteers from the MARS group yet?

A: Regular updates & feedback will be published in the museum times newsletter. This goes to all staff and volunteers working at museums and attractions in the region. If you don't receive this and would like to please contact Michelle Kozomara (Michelle.Kozomara@canalrivertrust.org.uk).

Q: At the height of the pandemic and subsequent months thereafter, there was an unprecedented demand for walking, running & cycling on the narrow footpaths adjacent to our two canals in Marple, Greater Manchester (which I am sure was repeated elsewhere in the North-West and nationally!). This further demonstrated two key problems - the general poor maintenance of the footways and the piecemeal levels of improvement, together with a significant increase in the level of litter. What is the NW Director's strategy for dealing with these inter-related problems, what programme of action has been developed and what efforts have been taken to engage with local communities to boost and coordinate volunteer action?

A: It has been great to see towpath use increase as more people discovered the canal on their doorstep during and since lockdown. This did bring some challenges that you detail such as increased litter and user conflict. We are seeing increases in fly-tipping, general littering, dog mess as well as magnet fishing waste and try to engage with local communities to support our efforts to clean their area by way of towpath taskforces whilst also trying to engage with the local authorities to help us address the issues as they have the enforcement powers.

We are actively seeking funding to improve our towpath condition and hope to benefit from some of the funding announced for active travel. Towpath improvement schemes, such as the one at Disley, are best achieved by partnership working with local authorities and getting the community and volunteers engaged in the project.

Towpath condition or even perception of condition is the single most important driver for people using the towpath. If the towpath has a nice surface and is clean, then users will have a good experience. The strategy we are taking is to get the canals up to Green Flag status, which is an external verification of a well-managed green space. We are on track to have over 50% of the region with a Green Flag award by 2023.

Communication and Information sharing

Q: 5 Regions produce Regional Newsletters. Why doesn't NW? It would be nice to learn what is going on in the region and of new faces/changed responsibilities.

A: We are planning to send out a regional newsletter to all active Trust volunteers to keep them updated about what is going on in the region and highlight any new volunteering opportunities. First edition will be out in October.

Q: Although I appreciate that the staff in management/supervisory roles are very busy, quite often e-mail correspondence goes unanswered.

A: We apologise for this and our colleagues should always be replying to volunteers and we can get better at this.

Q: I am a lock keeper at Bosley and like to keep boaters up to date with developments and changes, so could you update us what CRT are doing to try to improve the canal through Manchester, thus far those boaters doing the 'Cheshire Ring' have not had anything good to say about their experiences in Manchester so I would like to have some material to counter this please !

A: The Trust are working to transform the waterways in Manchester with the goal of making them cleaner, greener and safer for everyone. Before lockdown we planned a programme of volunteer activity on the Rochdale Canal and Ashton Canal. This involved our partner groups, community led clean-ups, corporate volunteers, adoption groups and regular Activity Days in the city centre. We are working hard to restart these activities in a covid secure way.

We have also been greening-up the waterways by planting on the towpath and installing floating gardens in the city centre. In addition to this we have been awarded a Green Flag between Lock 87 &89 in central Manchester.

Our community litter boat is active and will be a permanent presence in the city centre. This is a dedicated team of Trust colleagues and volunteers who work throughout the week on routine care and maintenance of the towpath and canal. They regularly remove 3 to 5 tonnes of litter and debris from the canal in a day. The team have put a big focus on repairing as many paddles as possible along with employing a system of more regular lubrication. They are also undertaking a large winter vegetation programme tackling offside vegetation along with a backlog of lock vegetation.

We are working with Manchester City Council and TfGM on a £1.3 million towpath improvement scheme as part of the Greater Manchester Bee Network (<https://tfgm.com/bee-network/districts/manchester/rochdale-canal-towpath>). This will improve the towpath between Ancoats and Newton Heath.

Much of our work depends on partnerships with the city council, businesses, developers, property owners and other organisations, and we are in daily contact with stakeholders about ways we can improve the canal. Our longer-term plans involve better lighting, more activity on and around the water, signage, and more green features to improve the environment around the canal.

We know that some of the issues around the canals are caused by complicated problems that affect the wider city and community, and we are working with our partners to address these.

Uniform (Grouped questions)

Q: Is there a delay in issuing volunteers with rebranded uniform items or are we ok still wearing items with the old logo?

Q: I am a volunteer lock keeper at Audlem and we have been told not to wear Canal & River Trust clothing unless it has the new logo. When can we have the new logo'd clothing issued?

Q: VLKs need to have some CRT clothing so boaters recognise the brand and who we represent. I am aware that clothing suppliers have been lacking in consistency but what is the situation (it's not easy to find any links for clothing on the website), VLKs in general will be happy to buy CRT clothing, how do we do this and how do we access the information /select and buy clothing please?

A: Since new uniform guidelines have been issued to put the Trust more in line with similar charitable organisations, there will be items of kit volunteers once received that will not be replaced. Wearing a newly branded (blue) tabard over any item that is not branded correctly is advised.

There is a new online uniform purchasing system that is in development and once it is live VDC's are planning to send round a communication highlighting this. You can currently make an order via My Trust and all the information is on the My Trust portal. If you go to My Volunteering then, Resources, then scroll down and there is a section on uniform and how to order it. Payment is processed through the website but the order needs to be placed by your task manager

Utilising volunteers within teams

Q: My perception is that other regions seem to quite often employ volunteers to re-locate work boats, but this seems to be rare in the NW. Surely it would be more productive of staff time not to waste time bringing a boat to a work site?

A: Volunteers often help teams in the North West move boats or support our activities by sailing boats for us. Post the Q&A meeting Maurice has been supporting some vegetation management tasks on the Weaver Navigation as well as sailing Daniel and the team along the Weaver for some site inspections.

If this kind of task is something you want to get involved with, please contact the relevant AOM or your task manager.

Q: Again, another perception, more volunteer training seems to be available in other regions, e.g. CAATS Assessor training.

A: There are certainly circumstances where we should look to upskill volunteers and provide further training. We have provided CAATS assessor training to volunteers in the past where we believed that this would streamline and speed up the assessment process for volunteer lock keepers. In the instance of planning any training we look at what gaps we have in staff

/volunteer training and what the local requirements are. This then must be factored into the regional training budget.

Q: It would be good if a volunteer (or volunteers) could be embedded alongside some activities of the Operations staff. If this is already done, then it should be better advertised (via a Regional Newsletter?) and extended.

A: There are many examples of where this is happening daily on the Leeds & Liverpool and the Peak Forest for example and we need to get this more visible. Post Q&A Maurice has been an integral part of delivering some of our works – supporting with sailing the boat.

Q: Where do we stand legally when we help CRT with PPM work, by that I mean if we inspect a culvert one day and it looks fine and the next day it has collapses?

A: All asset's (culverts etc) are inspected by a specialist team (asset inspectors) that would assess its condition and no responsibility would fall on a volunteer for a collapsed culvert. PPM's are simply the maintenance of that culvert, clearing debris etc and an 'inspection' to see if it may be blocked etc. Any support from a volunteer will be covered by Trust insurance as long as they are doing as they have been asked and let us know they are on site.

Q: We seem to have a number of magnet fishers in the North West, and I guess all over the country. I have heard and seen plenty of negative comments from CRT people regarding their activities and more specifically their discarded finds littering towpaths.

I am asking if it would be more beneficial to work with them, by offering them a contact number so that they can notify local CRT teams to remove these items. There are several magnet fishing sites on social media that we could be engaging with to get this going.

We need them to agree to move the rubbish to the side of the towpath so as not to obstruct it, and in return we will dispose of it. My personal view is that they are helping to clear our canals of significant amounts of rubbish and therefore should be given every assistance.

A: We don't support unsupervised magnet fishing. Removing these objects from the canal can be dangerous without the appropriate support. Items dragged out by magnets could be sharp or heavy or even, in extreme cases, cause people to be dragged into the water. (A father and son died on the Calder & Hebble navigation a few years ago). We have had reports of people fishing out old war bombs and dumped weapons which can cause canal closures and disruption to boaters. When people leave piles of metal on the towpath it can cause problems for other visitors, for example families with young children – it is unsightly and potentially can cause injury. If people are you're keen on helping to clean up the canal, we can offer details on joining one of our regular volunteering groups – again more information can be found at: <https://canalrivertrust.org.uk/volunteer>. We are willing to work with responsible magnet fishing groups willing to operate on a planned supervised basis where they are willing to follow all safety procedures and remove all debris recovered safely to leave towpaths free of clutter and safe.

Q: Wigan Council have enabled development and the building of eight prefabricated houses on the land between the Terminal building and Seven Stars Bridge. I was assured in December last year that although references to the Trust had been

removed from the project that the Trust still owned the land and that it was on the residual of a long lease to the Council taken out during the development to the Pier area towards the end of the 70's.

Does the Trust still own this land?

A: The Trust still owns the land; The Trust is the freeholder of the site and it has been leased to Wigan Council on a 250 year lease. The Council appointed Step Places as their preferred developer. The lease will be transferred to the developer.

Q: The development includes a new cantilevered walkway over the canal and UPVC picture windows which significantly change the character of the building. Was the development of the Warehouse Buildings approved by Heritage?

A: The developer did not get agreement from the Trust about replacing the windows with UPVC, however the council are satisfied that the planning process was followed and they (and apparently the conservation officer) are content with the UPVC windows in a conservation area. The Trust is in discussions (as landlord) with the developer about the work undertaken to date and the work still to be undertaken. The cantilevered walkway was part of the planning application that we were consulted on and to which we did not object, though the method of attaching it was not agreed with us before the works were carried out. The existing walkways were in poor condition and needed to be replaced. A cantilevered solution was agreed with the Trust's engineers as it would last longer, reduce maintenance requirements, and reduce the risk to boaters.

Q: Are there plans to check records are up to date and that all Volunteers have been given/done the required training?

A: We are about to undergo a volunteer data audit so VDC's have put together a plan to address/gather any information that is missing from our databases. Historically training has not always been logged on a central database and information was held locally. We will be striving to update all our records, but this may take some time. The guidance on what training each volunteer needs is very clear and robust.

Q: How do CRT see themselves developing their relationship with Partnership Groups /adoption groups as in some 2017 literature I saw that CRT did not want these groups to "damage CRTs brand recognition". I am sure CRT see these relationships as more positive these days but could you explain how you see these relationships developing?

A: Working in a positive and constructive manner with our Partner Groups, Adoptions, and indeed with all our volunteers, is paramount to achieving our shared goal of contributing to the success of the Trust. It is important that we understand each other's aspirations and the challenges we face, so that we can move forward together, and achieve our full potential, in doing so provide a worthwhile experience for all our customers.