



Urban
Bushland
Council WA Inc

Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Guide

for Bushcare Friends Groups

May 2023



natural resource
management program





Acknowledgement of Country

The Urban Bushland Council acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the traditional custodians of this country and that sovereignty by Noongar people has never been ceded. The Urban Bushland Council pays their sincere respects to Noongar elders past, present and emerging.

Introduction to Volunteering in Bushcare

In a time when Australian volunteers have less time to contribute than previous generations, recruiting and retaining volunteers is harder than ever.

To be successful now and into the future, Friends Groups (Groups) need to undertake two complementary and intertwined priorities:

1. Planning and undertaking Bushcare activities; and
2. Planning and undertaking volunteer recruitment and retention activities

This guide aims to help Groups undertake volunteer recruitment and retention planning within the context of Bushcare volunteering. This is an ongoing cyclical process that can be broken down into the following steps:

- Reflection
- Planning
- Recruitment Planning
- Promotion and Recruitment
- Welcoming, Training and Mentoring
- Recognition

Although this process may appear daunting, it is vital that Groups schedule adequate time for all these steps.

A systematic approach to volunteer recruitment and retention helps Groups run more smoothly, prevents burn out of key members, brings in new people with fresh ideas and energy, and ensures Groups will endure.



Reflection

Consider the following reflection questions:

- What are your Group's vision, long term and short-term objectives and goals?
- How does your Group go about communicating its vision within and outside the Group?
- How does your Group go about recruiting and mentoring new volunteers?
- How does your Group go about promoting and planning events/activities?
- How does your Group go about managing volunteer health and safety?
- How does your Group approach succession planning?
- How does your Group liaise with local council and other organisations?





Planning

Creating a vision and strategic plan

The reflection process has hopefully highlighted what the Group is currently doing and what it wants. It is also important that the Group knows their community, their strengths and interests in order to work with them and add value. Aim to cooperate, don't aim to compete unless essential.

Groups need to create and/or revisit their vision and have a clear and detailed strategy to achieve their aims.

It is essential that the strategy complements the plans of their associated Local Government Area (LGA) or land manager.

Establishing a vision, goals and objectives is best done together as a Group and not just by a committee. An inclusive process allows decisions to be made by consensus, builds greater commitment within the member base, and harnesses individual expertise and interest. Groups are reminded to make this process fun and inspiring.

1. **Dream as a Group**
2. **Share ideas**
3. **Clarify the vision**
4. **Define Group values**
5. **State strategies and goals**
6. **Implement**

It's important that Groups communicate their vision, goals and objectives to everyone, including new volunteers, as a call to action and as a promotional story. Also important is that Groups plan their communication values such as respect, openness and the sharing of ideas.

Ideally Groups regularly update goals and objectives and establish a list of priorities, which informs volunteer schedules.

Good planning allows Groups to take best advantage of episodic/short-term volunteering opportunities (currently the most appealing volunteering opportunity for many), apply for grants as they become available and influence their LGA in managing their site. Short term projects with set outcomes for students, schools and mentees of all ages, can be incorporated in a Group's planning.

Recruitment Planning

Recruitment of new volunteers is currently highlighted as one of the main challenges faced by Groups.

It is important to stress that there are no one size fits all, easy or quick solutions to recruiting volunteers. It's especially difficult to recruit long-term committee level volunteers. To do so occurs over a long period of time with sustained effort, dedication and some serendipity.

Volunteer manager

Recruiting and retaining volunteers is best undertaken by a dedicated Volunteer Manager. This should ideally be a naturally warm, welcoming, and inclusive person.

"A good manager will know everyone personally, its authentic and takes up a lot of time, emotional and mental space, but that's what it takes!"

- Shona Ann Hunter

A Volunteer Manager may undertake the following:

- Have processes in place to learn about volunteers' interests so they can be matched to a Group's activities.
- Welcome new volunteers.
- Inform volunteers of their rights and responsibilities.
- Develop and implement a volunteer recognition strategy.
- Assist with community engagement events and activities.
- Prepare position descriptions for volunteer roles.
- Broker support from volunteers' agencies/corporates/education groups to create partnerships.
- Manage the volunteer database.

Recruitment needs

Even though recruitment should be an inherent part of a Group's day to day activities, it is important to have a clear idea of its recruitment needs, which are informed by the following questions:

- **What are the Group's Bushcare goals?**
- **What does the Group want its volunteers to do? When and for how long?**
- **Who are the Group's current volunteers?**
- **What types of new volunteers does the Group need?**

Types of volunteers

Long-Term	Volunteer who regularly attends activities but is not involved in management of the Group
Short-Term	Volunteer who attends a single or limited number of (episodic) activities
Committee	Volunteer who is involved in the management of the Group
Supporter	Someone not directly involved with the Group's on-ground activities but receiving Group's newsletters /social media posts

Finding new volunteers in the community

There is an old adage that says if you want something done, ask a busy person. Similarly, if you want a volunteer, ask those who already volunteer. They know what it's like. There is another ancient proverb that goes - 'a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.' It is important that Groups remember that they could recruit people to committee positions from their current membership.

For Groups looking for new members, a key target group is local residents and passers-by. Current research indicates that other places to find new volunteers are:

- Immigrant groups
- Religious groups
- Corporate volunteers
- Gardening groups
- Local groups focused on retirement activities
- Intrepid land care/Activate Groups
- Groups with a focus of increasing mental health through nature immersion
- Schools and educational institutions

Partnerships, hubs, and collaborative work between Groups may also increase the volunteer pool.

Inclusivity matters

The real or perceived unapproachability of Groups is a major barrier to recruitment and should not be underestimated. For example, the existing age profile of a Group may be a disincentive to others to join if visible strategies for inclusion are not utilised.

Volunteers come from different cultural backgrounds, have differing abilities and varying levels of availability. Groups can adapt their range of activities and outreach to cater for these factors.

Volunteers also have differing levels of Bushcare skills. Upskilling volunteers with limited conservation experience should be embraced, and not seen as reducing a Group's overall capacity.

"If you think you are being welcoming then be 5 times more welcoming than that."

– Cassie Howell (Intrepid Landcare)

A recruitment success story

One of the ways a Group can immediately improve on recruitment is by reframing the activities they already do and promote them in new and engaging ways, through a multitude of promotional platforms and illustrating why they are important.

Over the Spring months Friends of Wireless Hill held a series of **combined events**, which facilitated new and established volunteers to weed gladiolus followed by either a bushfood tasting or a free coffee.

Outcomes:

- New volunteers joined the Group
- Weeding work was done
- People had fun and got to know each other
- Links were made with Indigenous people
- Education
- Follow up events and Group activities were promoted to those attending and people took away flyers to do mailbox drops
- Existing members felt valued and recognised



Bushfood Tasting with Dale Tilbrook and Gladys grab at Wireless Hill

Promotion and Recruitment

In order for Groups to attract new volunteers, they need to effectively promote their Group and their Group's vision for the protection of their Bushland, through a variety of methods.

Groups need to constantly communicate messages that are meaningful to their target audience, and that motivate people to take action.

Target audience

For most Groups their target audience is the following:

- **Demographic** – lives locally, works professionally or recently retired, has time/resources to volunteer.
- **Values** – community, environment conservation, being outdoors.
- **Motivation** – this will vary but includes wanting to do their part to make things better, socialising and contributing.
- **Interests** – nature, wildflowers, conservation, photography, finance, leadership, promotions.

Promotional platforms and methods

Even though digital platforms offer modern ways to promote and inform the community, word of mouth is still the way many people find out about Groups and their activities and turn up to volunteer. Other surprisingly effective ways to recruit new volunteers include onsite notice boards, onsite signage, and letterbox drops.

Groups ideally need to use a variety of methods to reach wide audiences:

- word of mouth
- social media
- websites
- local government platforms and promotional materials
- community newspapers
- notice boards, sandwich boards
- flyers and letterbox drops
- local radio

Regardless of the platform being used, the messaging needs to be appealing. Consider adapting the messaging to suit the platform used and the target audience. Images capture attention and should be interesting and high quality. Promotional posters will capture more attention with striking images and 'a call to action' text. Think also about the messaging that will work in the Group's local community and be responsive in developing messaging.

Make it appealing! *which one got more response?*

For example – these 2 posters were developed to promote a Clean Up Australia Day event.

The poster on the right has a more explicit call to action and was found to be more effective.





Facebook for Friends Groups

Facebook is an online community. It's free to use and can be used like a newsletter to update your Group on events and happenings. Facebook is an effective medium for the promotion of Groups because:

- it is used by people 35 to 65+ years, one of the biggest target groups for conservation volunteers
- people (including younger people) look to Facebook for events from environment groups
- Facebook pages can generate a large following
- free graphic design tools like Canva are tailored for use on Facebook

In setting up a Facebook presence, each Group has to decide whether to set up a Facebook page or a Facebook group. A Facebook page is managed by one or a small number of individuals with full control of the content. A Facebook group can have one or more administrators, who approve posts on the page and can be used for greater involvement by the community.

To make best use of Facebook consider the following recommendations:

- create posts that are engaging, are personal and tell a story
- create content that evokes an emotive response
- create posts tailored to the Group's 'ideal members' and motivations to get involved
- get as many members in your Group to collect content for posts, which can be passed on to the Facebook administrator to post
- be generous with facts, knowledge and insights

It is useful to understand how Facebook uses its algorithms to propagate content to new users. To make full use of this algorithm:

- create posts that invite interaction and comment
- post frequently, preferably at least each week
- post at the same time, every time you post
- use hashtags relevant to the post's content

Community engagement events

Events provide opportunities to promote Groups, their future events or activities and recruit new members. Events also help retention of the Group's volunteers through celebrating achievements and offering members special activities.

Depending on the Group's needs, the following types of community events can be facilitated:

Small and targeted event

Regular Bushcare activities such as weeding and guided walks can be advertised and reframed. Don't rely on the same core group of regular attendees. Open up to others constantly!

One-off Big event

An 'Open Day' style experience that attracts a large number of people and helps raise the overall profile of the Group.

Combined event

Regular Bushcare activities preceded or followed by a complementary event targeted at inducting new volunteers and celebrating existing volunteers (e.g. bushfood tasting, photography, music, family picnic).

'Bump opportunity' event

A succession of events that allow people to 'bump' into each other on a regular basis and get to know each other, building connections within the Group.

Small and combined events:



Watering event at Lake Gwelup

Friends of Lake Gwelup were able to get a big team together to water seedlings while providing kids activities, ice-creams and cool drinks to better involve families.



Smart phone photography

The Friends of Trigg Bushland regular bushland walk was extended to include photography workshops. This complemented their usual outreach and created greater community interest in the Group and was showcased on their Facebook page. Slowly attendees at regular weeding and watering days were increased.



Stall for signatures at Christmas market

Friends of Erindale Road Bushland were able to disseminate information about their campaign and gather more signatures while people celebrated Christmas.

A one-off Big event:



Annual Wireless Hill Wildflower walk

At the annual Wireless Hill Wildflower walk participants were asked to help put the word out about looking for new volunteers and to post their involvement on social media.



Wildflower Fiesta

The annual Wildflower Society wildflower walk, where normally 20 people attend, was elevated into an open day event that attracted over 200 people. Friends of Star Swamp Bushland and Friends of Trigg Bushland joined forces to promote and host the event. Activities included bushland walks, talks, forest bathing, kids' activities and reptile encounters.

Bump event:

Friends of Cottonwood Bushland held a series of events over 5 months to build community interest in the new group. Events included Bushfood tasting, Smart phone photography, Clean up Australia Day and tree planting. Local people from the community were able to bump into each other and get to know participants better at each event and incrementally the willingness to join the group grew.



Welcoming, Training and Mentoring

Welcoming

Welcoming new volunteers is an important step that is often overlooked. It is important to make new volunteers feel part of the team, ensuring they understand what your group is trying to achieve and looking after their personal safety and well-being.

"Groups need to actively put new volunteers under their wings and show them the ropes, they need to respond to new enquiries immediately, otherwise you have lost them" – Nick Cook (Friends of Lake Claremont)

A volunteer manager will undertake to orientate new volunteers on the following aspects:

- Group facilities and bushland
- Group and volunteer rights, expected behaviour and responsibilities
- Grievance resolution process
- Occupational Health and Safety
- Privacy and confidentiality

Engaging Young people

People aged 18 to 30 year old are moving around for work and accommodation and often cannot commit to being in one place/specific Group. Many are overwhelmed by the climate crisis and the loss of biodiversity and want to fortify themselves by doing environmental conservation activities as a social activity with friends. Generally, they prefer informal one-off events and are keen to be involved in shaping the events that appeal to them.

Groups can consider the following when engaging with younger people:

- Younger people may find it difficult to approach an established Group and join in unless members make them feel very welcome and valued.
- Younger people are more likely to join Groups where there are already younger people.
- Younger people are drawn to events such as "Tree Planting Raves" and "Activate the Wheat Belt", music and Bushcare events, speed dating alongside weeding and planting events.
- Younger people welcome opportunities for mentorships and internships.
- Younger people feel valued when offered a formal place within your Group.

Training

Training initiatives, mentoring programs and workshops enhance volunteer experience, instill confidence, and increase the willingness of volunteers to tackle new challenges and roles within the Group.

Groups often don't have the capacity to run training programs or workshops, but the following external resources exist that Groups can utilise;

- Urban Bushland Council
- Volunteering WA
- UWA Guild Volunteering
- WA Landcare Network





Mentoring

One of the unique attractions of Friends Groups is the opportunity of volunteers to learn new skills and knowledge by practical immersion with seasoned Bushcare practitioners on the ground.

Groups with mentors that are knowledgeable, well organised, possess excellent interpersonal and communication skills, and who relate to a broad range of people, find it easier to attract volunteers.

Important qualities of Group leaders

A good leader inspires action, is optimistic, has integrity, supports the team, has confidence, communicates well and is decisive.

Leaders need to be open to new ideas and methods to keep in line with social and technological changes. A good leader knows when to step down.

Individual differences play a big role within Groups. Negative 'interpersonal' elements can be a major impediment to volunteer recruitment, succession planning and the long-term sustainability of the Group.

Good relationships within the group and with external bodies are vitally important.

"New volunteers witnessing conflict or disagreement might not want to come back"
– Heidi Hardisty

Succession planning

Succession planning is about identifying and developing future leaders for the Group.

A successful succession plan includes:

- Being able to share the knowledge about the Group and how to do key roles.
- Getting to know the Group's volunteers and how they might contribute to leadership roles and tasks
- Upskilling prospective leaders on organisational and operational knowledge
- Changing the leadership regularly to avoid burnout and refresh the Group's management

Group leaders need to be open, willing and able to hand over or delegate core skills/knowledge and responsibilities to others.

Targeting new leaders

Use word of mouth and actively approach individuals to join the Group's committee. Ask them at a period of their lives when they have time (and resources) to devote to your Group, or find out when would be a good time.

When current leaders go on holiday or are unwell ask suitable individuals in the Group to fill in, this builds confidence for all involved and trials the person within the role.



Recognition

"Your volunteers have worth and meaning that needs to be regularly expressed" - Shona-Ann Hunter

It's common for Groups to forget to recognise and reward their volunteers, who willingly offer their time, skills, and experience.

Below are some ways your Group can show respect, recognise, and reward your valuable volunteers:

- Have a place to meet after tasks and share morning or afternoon tea together – in the bushland, a club house or at a local café.
- Host other social events such as beginning and end of year sundowners, Christmas picnics, grandchild/family days.
- Hold events to celebrate milestone achievements and outstanding member contributions and provide certificates and rewards for volunteers.
- Publicly acknowledge volunteers and illustrate their positive impact.
- Create members-only activities.
- Provide identification badges and volunteer T-shirts.
- Write letters and postcards of thanks.
- Offer personal praise where appropriate.
- Gather feedback from volunteers regularly to make improvements and show that their opinions are valued. Listen to volunteers' ideas in person, by requesting regular feedback or through coffee sessions.
- Tailor tasks to what motivates individual volunteers.

CHECK LIST

- ✓ Can our Group be more welcoming, inclusive, flexible, fun and engaging?
- ✓ Are we open to change and new ways of doing things?
- ✓ Have we highlighted and communicated our vision, long term and short-term objectives and goals?
- ✓ Do we have a volunteer manager?
- ✓ What are our recruitment needs?
- ✓ What are the motivations and benefits of volunteering with our Group?
- ✓ Have we developed volunteer roles and episodic volunteering schedules?
- ✓ Do we have procedures for volunteers – induction, health and safety, grievances?
- ✓ Do we have a marketing and promotion plan and is anyone appointed to implement?
- ✓ Does our community know about us and how to get involved?
- ✓ Are we active in reaching out to people to volunteer? Do we have a list of the groups and organisations we would like to approach?
- ✓ What activities that celebrate, reward, and recognise volunteers are we undertaking?
- ✓ Are we illustrating our impact?
- ✓ What Community engagement events are we undertaking?
- ✓ How are we reframing our regular activities to broader audiences?
- ✓ How are we aiding our succession planning? Are we delegating tasks?
- ✓ How can we mentor more students and volunteers?
- ✓ How can we liaise more productively with our LGA and other organisations?
- ✓ What training does our Group need?



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Photos by Suzi Mccarthy and Johanna Riddell

This project is supported by funding from the Western Australian Government's State NRM Program.



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