Data entry volunteers

Tips for schemes
We know that keeping on top of the ongoing data entry requirements that are part of being an accredited scheme can be a challenge for many schemes. We know that a lot of you are struggling with limited staff and volunteer capacity, and conflicting priorities.

So we’ve spoken to three schemes – Step Out Sheffield; New Forest Healthy Walks and East Surrey Walking for Health – to understand more about how they manage this for their schemes.

All three schemes are relatively large, so there are a lot of forms to keep on top of. However, with different challenges such as local geography, number of walkers, an ageing and long-standing volunteer base, different funders and delivery partners, or limited staff or volunteer capacity, they have all approached the data management requirements in different ways.

New Forest – integrating data entry responsibilities into the walk leader role

The New Forest scheme runs around 40 walks a month. The scheme coordinator, Jan Barratt, is based in a local charity and funded for 8 hours a week to dedicate to Walking for Health.

This scheme has integrated data entry responsibilities into the walk leader role. The walk leader training includes a section explaining the importance of collecting the data for reporting to local funders, so the walk leaders clearly understand how the data is used from the outset. All walk leaders are responsible for submitting their walk registers as part of their role descriptions, and Jan provides dedicated database training for every new walk leader.

While this initial training does take time and requires resources to cover volunteer travel expenses, it has other benefits for the scheme coordinator in terms of developing a good relationship with her volunteers and ensuring they understand where to access support. This approach doesn’t come without its challenges: there are some walk leaders who don’t want to do this, or don’t have computers to do it. In these instances, the paper registers and registration forms are sent to Jan to submit.

Sheffield – having enough cover and support for data entry volunteers

Step Out Sheffield is coordinated by a volunteer committee and runs over 100 walks a month. The scheme has a dedicated volunteer database manager, Dan Murphy, who sits on their committee and is also a walk leader.

They recruit a data entry volunteer for each walk – in most cases this is the walk leader or occasionally a regular walker. Each walk leader is supported by a local ‘link officer’: these are other volunteers whose roles are to oversee the walks in the different parts of the city. These link officers can therefore provide support to the walk leaders and data entry volunteers meaning individual volunteers are not over-burdened.

A key priority for the scheme is to keep on top of the data entry to prevent backlogs: they previously experienced this issue when the scheme had its funding withdrawn and the future of the scheme was in doubt. Once the scheme transitioned to a volunteer-led model and was more certain of its future, there was a huge task to get on top of the backlog of registers and registration forms. Now, all registers are usually submitted within two days.
As database manager, Dan regularly reviews the data and shares monthly reports with the link officers to report on who the scheme is reaching and which walks have been delivered.

Dan also sends a regular email to volunteers which includes tips on the database, especially if he notices inaccuracies or mistakes (for example in how walk leaders or volunteers are logged).

**East Surrey – regular volunteer communications and support**

East Surrey runs over 70 walks a month. The coordinator, Julie Haslett, is based in a local charity and is funded for 12 hours a week for the scheme.

Julie has recruited data entry volunteers from the existing walk leaders. It isn’t required of the walk leaders, and Julie finds that some are keen and others aren’t. They have also recruited a new volunteer, through the local volunteer centre, into a newly developed volunteer admin support role. As the data administration can be done at home or at the office, and at any time of the day, it is a flexible role that suits people not looking for a set weekly commitment.

Julie spends time with all new volunteers to train them on the database. As her time dedicated to managing the scheme is limited, she can’t regularly visit volunteers on the walks, but she is in frequent contact with them over the phone and via email to see how they’re doing. A key part of Julie’s role is to support the volunteers and ensure they know where they can get help and advice from. She also spends time reviewing the calendar to monitor the registers that aren’t being submitted, and shares key stats to highlight how the data is used and to showcase the achievements of the volunteers.

Despite the fact that Julie always gives volunteers a choice about whether or not they want to take on the data entry role, there are some volunteers who agree to take this on, but struggle with it. This creates a backlog which can be overwhelming for that volunteer, and Julie often struggles to help to get on top of it herself in the time she has available.

**Common challenges**

- **Lack of capacity:** If existing walk leaders are not keen to take on data entry responsibilities, it can fall to the scheme coordinator, who often doesn’t have enough time to dedicate to this in their role. One solution is to recruit data administrators from regular walkers, or recruit new volunteers for the role. It can also be beneficial to encourage local walk leaders and data entry volunteers to support each other so the data entry volunteers can cover more than one walk.

- **Managing a backlog:** As soon as backlogs build up, it becomes an insurmountable task. Set clear expectations for volunteers to submit registers as soon as possible after the walk. If a backlog starts to develop, encourage the volunteers to ask for help from the scheme coordinator or other data entry volunteers.

- **Recruiting volunteers:** It can be hard to recruit new volunteers – we know that some schemes struggle to recruit enough walk leaders, let alone data entry volunteers. However, taking on data entry responsibilities may appeal to a different type of volunteer as it is more flexible and requires different skills. Contact local volunteer centres and community hubs to recruit new volunteers with different skills, interests and experiences. Alternatively, build in responsibility for submitting registers into the walk leader role when you recruit new walk leaders – as long as the majority of your walk leaders are happy to take on this additional role, it will reduce the burden on the coordinator to do this task.
• **Resistance to paperwork:** Some volunteers hate paperwork and computers. Taking on data entry responsibilities, like all volunteering roles, should be a choice – no one should be forced to do it. However, it’s important that you help walk leaders to understand how important the information is to ensure you are able to develop the scheme, deliver high quality walks and make the case to local funders and you recruit volunteers with the right skills, motivations and experience to help you to deliver your walks programme.

**Key learning for other schemes**

- Integrate responsibilities for submitting walk registers and registration forms into the role of walk leader where possible.
- Ensure all walk leaders understand how the data is used by the scheme and the importance of staying up to date with data entry.
- Spend time training new volunteers at the very start, and ensure they know how they can access help and support.
- Plan for sufficient cover and support for volunteers: you could link local walk leaders together to provide cover when required, or recruit more than one data entry volunteer for each walk.
- Regularly review the data to ensure the registers are being submitted and the information is accurate.
- Keep in touch with your data entry volunteers – share tips and interesting stats in regular email newsletters.

**Support from the national team**

Remember – you’re not alone! You’re part of a national programme of health walk schemes and the national programme team is here to support you.

**Template role description:** We’ve produced a template volunteer role description for this role. You will need to adapt this to reference your own volunteer, training and data protection policies.

**Support and feedback to national team:** walkingforhealth@ramblers.org.uk Phone: 0207 339 8541

**Training:** We have detailed user guides and video tutorials available on the website. But you can also get in touch if you have any questions or are struggling. We know the database isn’t perfect, so let us know how you think it can be improved and we will see what we can do.