



# Venturer Camp 2023: A Co-operative Approach to Youth Residentials

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When thinking about small festivals, large parties or youth residential activities, a common approach is to outsource to professionals who run a top-down organising team. Within Woodcraft Folk, this is not the way we operate. Venturer Camp 2023 which took place for a week in the summer of 2023, is a testament to how co-operative values can contribute to the efficient co-ordination of a residential activity for approximately 450 people. This reflective article will explore how co-operation can positively contribute to youth residential co-ordination, where it falls down, and what we can learn from the process, drawing from my experience as a Volunteer Camp Co-ordinator.

## Introduction

Woodcraft Folk is a UK based youth movement with 200 nationwide groups who meet weekly and camp in the summer in big and small groups. There's a running joke about scratching your ear at the wrong time in a Woodcraft Folk meeting and ending up with a new voluntary role, although this wasn't the case for the way in which I ended up co-ordinating Venturer Camp 2023. I had recently broken into the national events space, through co-ordinating the setup week of Common Ground 2022. This was an international camp for approximately 2,700 people from around the world with ages ranging from 6 months to 60 years. The camp ran for ten days in the summer of 2022 and was organised by Woodcraft Folk and IFM-SEI (International Falcon Movement — Socialist Educational International). During the camp, I was congratulated for my efforts with the setup week, and it was suggested I should co-ordinate the next Venturer Camp, a national camp for Woodcraft members ages 13 to 15 which runs every three years. Co-ordinating a Venturer Camp sounded like a challenge, it sounded new, it sounded exciting, and it sounded like something I could fit in alongside starting university.

Throughout the second half of Common Ground, I spent some time talking to different people about what a Venturer Camp should be and what the movement craved for in the next one. Venturer Camps are supported by older young people who volunteer in various ways. The most recent one had been held in 2019 with around 400 people in attendance. Having conversations with these volunteers was extremely valuable as it gave me an understanding of the amount of dedication some volunteers pour into making these events a success.

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After recovering for a few weeks from a summer of camping, it was time to start thinking practically about what we wanted to achieve. The goal was simple, reinvigorate the youth after their key developmental years were stolen from them as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The co-ordination team also set ourselves the stretch goal of running an event which wouldn't burn out volunteers, rather leaving them refreshed and relaxed — despite supervising a gaggle of teenagers in a field for seven days! These goals are alongside the usual traits of a good Woodcraft Folk camp — providing a space where young people are free to live in a world as we want it to be, a safe haven from outside pressure and troubles. Woodcraft Folk camps aim to give young people unforgettable experiences, whether this be camping, playing new games, or even getting stuck in to the cooking, alongside some time for rest and socially bonding with peers.

## **Starting the Planning**

As the metaphorical starting klaxon sounded, we were hit with a tough question which would dictate the next 12 or 24 months of the co-ordination team's life. This was a really crucial question to solve early on as the uncertainty makes it hard to plan anything, ranging from booking a site to booking infrastructure to put on the site! The question, on the surface seemed simple, but the subtleties made it a challenge to answer; when should the next Venturer Camp be held? In times gone past, the question was answered automatically, with Venturer Camps being a triennial event; however, the pandemic threw a bent tent pole in the pole-bag. As of the 2019 Venturer Camp, the next camp was due to be held in 2022; however, after being delayed from 2020, Common Ground took the 2022 summer spot instead. This left me and my team a choice of 2023 or 2024. Turning to our network of Venturer Leaders and their groups, based around the UK, they voted for 2023, citing that they wanted a year off from major nationwide events before Woodcraft's Centenary Celebrations in the summer of 2025, as well as the young people wanting to rekindle friendships formed at Common Ground.

The next piece of the puzzle was to find a site in which we could hold the camp. Given the short lead time (approximately 10 months) we were working with, our choices were quite limited. Fortunately, Woodcraft Folk manages an 18-acre campsite in the Wye Valley which had suitable availability in the summer of 2023. Once our booking at the stunning Biblins Youth Campsite was confirmed, we were able to push on with finding enthusiastic volunteers to bring the camp into existence.

## **Finding Volunteers**

Volunteers would be the driving force pulling the camp into existence, turning empty fields into fields full of happy teenagers enjoying an organised programme and eating well-planned food. Finding keen, willing, and enthusiastic volunteers is mostly done through chatting to people at large events and following up with some social media posts to the masses, inviting them to get involved. The year choice, regrettably, drove some people away because they had time to commit after the summer of 2023, but not before.

To take on a large role for an event like this was a new thing for many members of the team. This is something which Woodcraft is really good at promoting, usually with excellent mentoring. However, for Venturer Camp 2023 we didn't have time or capacity in the team to look after those pouring voluntary hours into making the event a success. Not having these structures in place tore the co-operative plans in two, resulting in things getting dropped and only being picked up months later by overstretched volunteers already struggling to manage with their role. There's a notion in Woodcraft of "it'll be alright on the night" which proves the flexibility and co-operative nature of our volunteers, however, there are some things which need a bit more forethought put into them and so can't be left to the night before the event starts.

Finding enough volunteers to make the camp happen proved more of a challenge than I think anyone was expecting. I was fortunate to fill out the key roles (Programme Co-ordination, Food

Co-ordination, and Site Infrastructure Co-ordination) with volunteers relatively early on, which green-lit the project to continue. However, filling out the remainder of the core roles (Admin & Bookings Co-ordinator and Communications Co-ordinator) proved more of a challenge. This is where good co-operation between myself and the Woodcraft Folk National Office staff assigned to work on this project proved essential, as we split these roles between us alongside working on our main roles in Venturer Camp. Not having dedicated volunteers in post drastically increased the amount of time we all needed to pour into the camp, which is a shame as having a bigger volunteer team would have meant that there was less pressure on individuals and a greater feeling of shared responsibility for a project on which we're all working collaboratively.

The role of Camp Co-ordinator involves quite a lot of metaphorical firefighting, with teams bringing their most difficult problems to your inbox, in areas where you have no expertise. This is where you have to rely on their specialist subjects and the knowledge they bring, so the right decisions are made, even if the Co-ordinator just acts as a sounding board for them. Good organisation is essential to have within Co-ordination teams. It can benefit in many other ways, ranging from individuals taking more accountability over their areas of camp if they're given ownership of it, through to teams working better together and ultimately making their little bit of camp as slick as they can.

## **Making Changes**

As the Co-ordinator of a project like this, there's a lot of pressure to change things and to make them better. Woodcraft Folk is really good at coming together and camping, with over fifty camping or residential expeditions taking place each calendar year throughout our network of groups and districts. Some of these camping expeditions take place with one district and some with multiple districts, however, they're all relatively small ranging from 20 to 150 attendees. These smaller camping expeditions have their ways of doing things, carefully honed after years of practice. The large-scale national events are less well practised, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic stopped all residential activity for over a year, disrupting the natural flow of events.

For Venturer Camp 2023, we aimed to improve on a few things, the biggest thing being volunteer wellbeing. After seeing the masses of exhausted volunteers after Common Ground, I knew we had to do something about it, we had to be better. The biggest change we made to improve on volunteer wellbeing was to communicate better with the groups coming to Venturer Camp. We asked groups to bring enough competent adults so that volunteers could co-operate to have time off to rest and recuperate in the middle of camp. This fantastic display of co-operation between geographically separated groups was an impressive example of what happens when you have a group of highly competent Woodcraft Leaders in a field together for seven days. Many villages (a collection of three or four groups totalling 100 people camping, eating, and completing activities together) found that through bringing enough leaders, everyone was able to have some downtime. This enabled them to engage with the children and young people in a way that surprised the young people, having not seen their leaders this relaxed on a residential before.

Another big change we made to Venturer Camp 2023 was to expand the age range. A decision was made early on to allow anyone aged 13-17 to attend as a participant. This plugged the hole opened by moving the camp back 12 months. Expanding the age ranges meant that the camp was more accessible and enabled young people to come who had part of their teenage years interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. There were many 16 and 17 year olds who would have missed out on their Venturer Camp experience who were able to attend in 2023. Lots of these young people have gone on to show an interest in volunteering at future events, whether that be the next International Camp or the next Venturer Camp. Expanding the age ranges like this was quite a big risk in terms of how the 13 and 17 year olds would get on together. In reality, a beautiful display of co-operation came from the teenagers where both 13 and 17 year olds took part in the same activity and worked together to complete it. This was especially seen with the

canoeing we offered in the river, where young people co-operated together to paddle their way down the River Wye.

## Bringing Things Together

The intervening months between the project starting, plans being made in Autumn 2022, and boots hitting the ground in July 2023, were filled with meetings, conversations, spreadsheets, and co-operation between teams and volunteers within them to make the best laid plans. At the end of June 2023, we had a team meeting on site for a weekend where a significant proportion of the team were together in a physical space for the first time. This was an interesting weekend where we got to see the camping pitches, count stored marquees, and see the rising levels of the River Wye. Alongside the leisurely strolls up and down campsite debating pitch size for villages, we had some really important conversations, where teams were able to share their progress, worries, and plans for the next four weeks. Some of these conversations led to eye opening realisations of how far back some elements of planning went. These face-to-face conversations emphasise how important effective communication is to co-operation.

To summarise the next month in one word isn't a challenge, it was manic. Teams had lists of tasks they needed to get done before hitting site, ranging from placing the all-important food orders, to planning equipment used in villages, to finalising what workshops centres would be running. There was a never-ending to do list. The importance of co-operation between team members to pull this off is not to be understated. This was seen especially in teams where they didn't manage to co-operate effectively, where members disappeared for weeks on end, not committing fully to the project. Unfortunately, this happened in this last month, to a team which couldn't fail, leaving other volunteers to pick up the pieces around them. Moments like this leave questions about the flat, co-operative structure employed within the co-ordination team at Woodcraft Folk events and how things could be different if we took a different volunteer structure with more clearly defined leadership roles.

Looking back beyond the teams' month of madness and beyond our on-site meeting, we find a bigger issue with the co-ordination of Venturer Camp — Communication. Effectively communicating with a team of volunteers is a real challenge as, for some volunteers, their role in Venturer Camp is really important to them but to others, less so. Finding the balancing point here, so everyone can co-operate to make this camp happen, is a real challenge. On reflection, it would have been better to take a step back and work out timelines in the Autumn of 2022, or having a shared way for people to indicate availability. Despite the communication challenges, we did manage to co-operate, with the teams falling into an understanding of each other's availability and that enabled individuals to collaborate within teams to make the best camp they could.

Eventually, we got there. Eventually, boots hit the ground. Eventually, the first tent peg was forced into the ground. The first few hours on site at a Woodcraft Camp are tender, delicate, and something to be savoured before the madness of Setup Week begins. As marquees are dusted off, trestle tables unfolded, and craft equipment drawn out of storage, the site begins to come to life. Volunteers begin to work together to create something beautiful. This something is a culmination of months of work from volunteers, in some cases putting more hours into this than their day-job. As civilisation begins to form in the field, seeing teams work together to divide up the biscuits, to lay out programme timetables, or to test the cheese toastie grill is a really satisfying accomplishment when witnessed from the Co-ordinator's perspective. This project took over my life for 12 months and to see it come together was an incredibly empowering feeling. The camp only came into existence because of the months of planning done by a team of volunteers, co-operating to make this thing happen because they care about perpetuating Woodcraft Folk to fresh groups of young people. The co-operation between different people, from different walks of life, at different stages of life is only something you would find in an organisation like Woodcraft Folk and is something more organisations should take example from!

Something not often publicly talked about is the finances of these events. We took a bold move with Venturer Camp 2023 to make it as accessible to volunteers as possible by reducing financial barriers to volunteering by charging volunteers a third of the participant price. The risk with this paid off, but only due to the amazing fundraising which was done — some through a National Woodcraft fundraiser, and some through a dedicated fundraising campaign. Three DF (District Fellowship) members (part of the 16-20 year old semi-autonomous division of Woodcraft Folk) travelled by coracle and kayak for two days down the River Wye, to arrive to camp on the first day by boat. Through doing this, they raised over £1,000 which contributed to making Venturer Camp more accessible to all. Seeing the co-operation between friends to do something daft like this, to raise funds for a project, was a really heart-warming moment.

## **Bringing Things to a Close**

By the end of camp, co-operative spirit was at an all time high, despite energy levels dwindling. After a camp takes place, there is usually a small team of tired volunteers left to clean up the site, returning it to a usable state in less than three days. For Venturer Camp, we were left with about 10 people, who had all been camping for over a week already. We were all equally exhausted and equally committed to the cause of getting off site as quickly as possible. Through the co-ordinated exhaustion does come some amusing moments — for example the group of us dancing to *We Like to Party* by the Vengaboys while doing literally any task, ranging from taking down a marquee, to unloading a van of equipment back into storage. This camaraderie is a direct result of the good co-operation shown by everyone and the bonds formed throughout the camp, well it's that — or the levels of exhaustion felt by the team!

The success of Venturer Camp 2023 is a testament to the power of co-operation. The camp demonstrates that achieving a shared goal — making a fun, safe, and sustainable event for children, young people, and adults alike to enjoy and celebrate the best bits of Woodcraft Folk, and the common values we share being bound together through all being members of this youth movement — is only possible through collective effort. Within the co-ordination team, co-operation was vital. Through co-operating together, we were able to distribute tasks evenly between volunteers who in turn pulled their weight in getting the work done and the plans made, overcoming challenges together as one. The spirit of co-operation extends beyond the core team — with local groups and districts also being run by teams of volunteers — preparing the young people to come to the event, showing the collaborative nature of the entire organisation. By working together, the co-ordination team not only ensured the camp was a success, but also strengthened the bonds between members in the movement. Co-operation is not just an integral part of Woodcraft Folk, it is an integral principle for any successful project, and I'm honoured to have been able to carry the flag through co-operatively co-ordinating Venturer Camp 2023.

## **The Author**

Thomas Boxall is a young adult who grew up as an active member of a local Woodcraft Folk group. He has held many different voluntary roles ranging from Local Group Leader to Regional Treasurer to National Webmaster. He took on the challenge of co-ordinating Venturer Camp 2023 to ensure that young people would be able to have their Venturer Camp experience, after the COVID-19 Pandemic threatened to steal it from them.