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Towards a Sustainable Volunteer Structure for AFS Sweden's Camps

BAP Research Report

Bachelor of International Organisation and Management (IOM)

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Abstract

This research investigates how *AFS*¹ *Interkultur Sverige* (in English referred to as AFS Sweden) can develop a sustainable volunteer structure for its camp programme that ensures knowledge continuity, effective recruitment and volunteer retention. The study employs a qualitative approach combining desk research (academic literature, internal AFS documents and comparative case analysis) with 13 semi-structured interviews across three stakeholder groups: camp volunteers ($n = 8$), SLUG² members ($n = 4$) and a board representative ($n = 1$).

The findings reveal three interconnected root causes underlying the current structural challenges: (1) the absence of formalised governance and role definitions creates a self-reinforcing pattern of workload concentration, (2) knowledge management depends on individuals rather than systems, leading to cyclical knowledge loss and (3) the geographical and organisational distance between the Danish-based office and Swedish volunteers weakens coordination and support structures. These root causes interact in a self-reinforcing cycle: governance gaps lead to person-dependent knowledge, which limits the pool of capable successors, which further concentrates workload among a shrinking group of experienced volunteers.

Based on these findings, five recommendations are proposed: (1) formalise volunteer roles and the national groups, (2) build a centralised, governed knowledge workspace, (3) establish structured office–volunteer communication touchpoints, (4) design a visible onboarding and development pathway and (5) organise an annual cross-Nordic volunteer gathering. A comparative analysis of AFS Norway and AFS Denmark demonstrated that practical solutions to these challenges already exist within the Nordic AFS network, including shared digital workspaces, dedicated planning committees and standardised onboarding procedures.

The selected business product, a co-created *Camp Volunteer Toolkit*, addresses all three root causes through a combination of role templates, handover protocols, camp planning templates, a volunteer development pathway, an evaluation and learnings toolkit and a communication overview. The toolkit was designed through an iterative co-creation process with former SLUG members and experienced volunteers and is built within AFS Sweden’s existing ONE AFS environment for immediate deployment during the 2026 summer camp season. Its effectiveness will be evaluated against four criteria: adoption rate, knowledge continuity, volunteer experience and handover completeness.

¹Formerly American Field Service.

²Sveriges Lager Utbildnings Group.

Keywords: volunteer management, knowledge transfer, organisational sustainability, AFS, intercultural exchange, camp programme

AI Disclaimer

In the preparation of this research report, the following AI tools were used:

Claude was used for four specific purposes:

- Brainstorming interview questions: Initial prompt: “Based on the following research questions about volunteer structures in NGOs, suggest a semi structured interview questions that cover motivation, knowledge transfer, collaboration with paid staff members and the board, camp structure, culture and identity, but also workload, support and sustainability” The output was critically reviewed, adapted and supplemented with context-specific questions about AFS Sweden.
- Proofreading and language correction: Prompt: “Proofread the following section for grammatical accuracy in English. Do not change the content, only correct language errors.” Sections of the report were checked for grammatical accuracy in English. No content was generated; only language corrections were accepted.
- Structuring the thematic analysis: Prompt: “Help me organise the following interview codes into thematic clusters.” The suggested clusters were compared with my own coding and adjusted accordingly.
- Report cohesion: Prompt: “Help me improve the following text to make it more cohesive and academic in tone.” Claude was asked to help improve the report’s overall cohesion and academic tone. All suggestions were critically reviewed and only accepted where they improved clarity without altering the content or argumentation.
- $\text{\LaTeX}$ layout and code correction (Overleaf): Prompt examples included: “Help me fix the following $\text{\LaTeX}$ code so it compiles correctly in Overleaf” and “How can I adjust spacing, figures, tables and references in this $\text{\LaTeX}$ document without changing the content?” AI assistance was used to resolve compilation errors and improve formatting consistency. All suggestions were critically reviewed and selectively implemented. The AI did not generate or alter any academic content; its use was strictly limited to technical and layout-related support.

List of Abbreviations

AFS	American Field Service (historical); AFS Intercultural Programs
BAP	Bachelor's Project
EPOT	European Pool of Trainers
ESC	European Solidarity Corps
HMW	How Might We
HF	Host Family
CP	Contact Person
NPOT	National Pool of Trainers
RC	Root Cause
RQ	Research Question
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SECI	Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination, Internalisation
SLUG	Sveriges Läger Utbildnings Group (Swedish Camp and Education Group)
SPOT	Scandinavian Pool of Trainers
SQ	Sub Question
VOL	Volunteer
YFU	Youth For Understanding

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This chapter introduces the organisational context, defines the research problem and outlines the methodological approach. It establishes the scope, justification and limitations of the study.

1.1 Organisational context: AFS Sweden

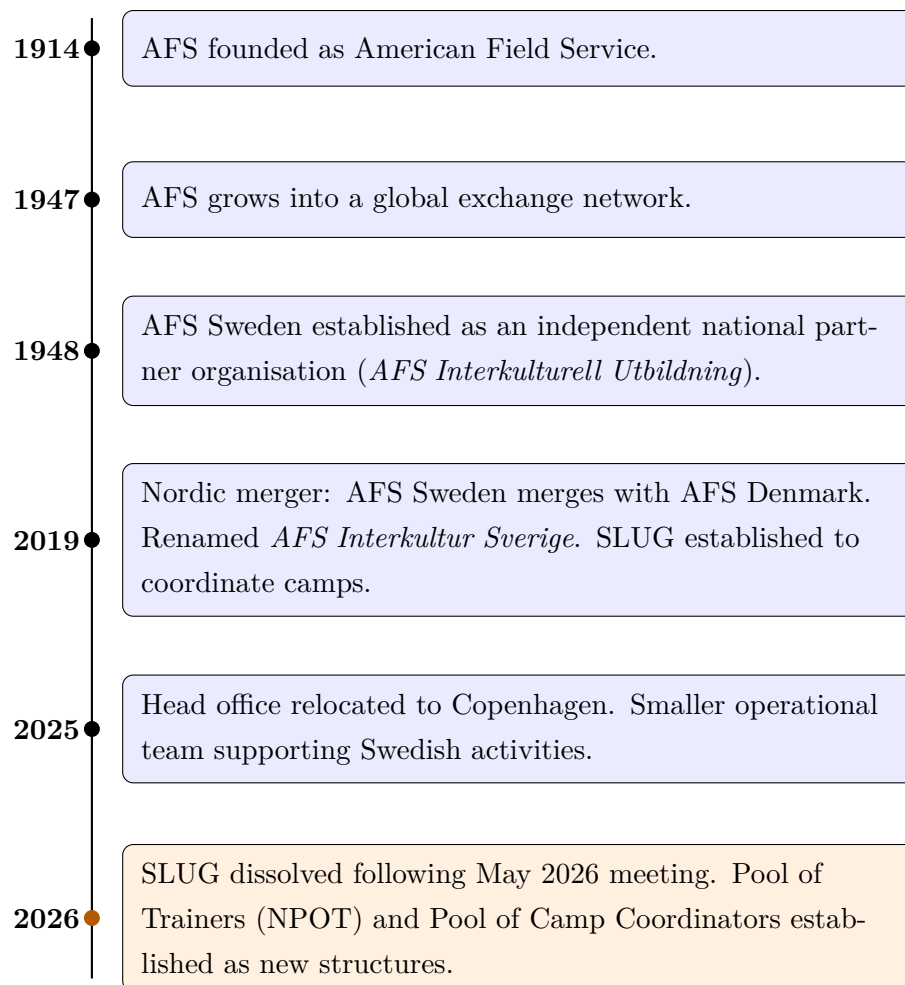


Figure 1.1: Timeline of AFS Sweden's organisational history and the Nordic restructuring.

What is AFS?

AFS Intercultural Programs is an international, non-governmental, non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting intercultural understanding among young people. It provides intercultural learning opportunities to help people develop the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to create a more just and peaceful world (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2026).

Founded in 1914 as a volunteer ambulance corps during the First World War, AFS gradually shifted its focus towards international youth exchange. By 1947 it had grown into a global exchange network built on peace-building through youth exchange. In 1948, AFS Sweden was established as an independent national partner organisation. Today, AFS operates in over 50 countries, with the global organisation setting the educational framework and standards while national partners carry out programmes locally (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2026).

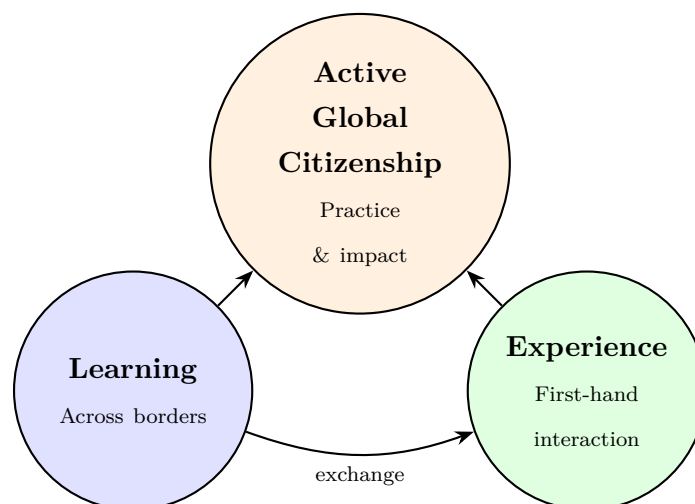


Figure 1.2: From learning across borders to active global citizenship (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2026).

At the heart of AFS’s approach is its Theory of Change: every AFS programme combines experience (genuine first-hand interactions with difference), learning (structured and facilitated learning journeys) and practice (exposure to real-world social impact and changemaking tools). Together, these three elements develop what AFS calls active global citizens: people whose informed, compassionate and ethical compass drives them to contribute to a more just, equitable, peaceful and sustainable world (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2026).

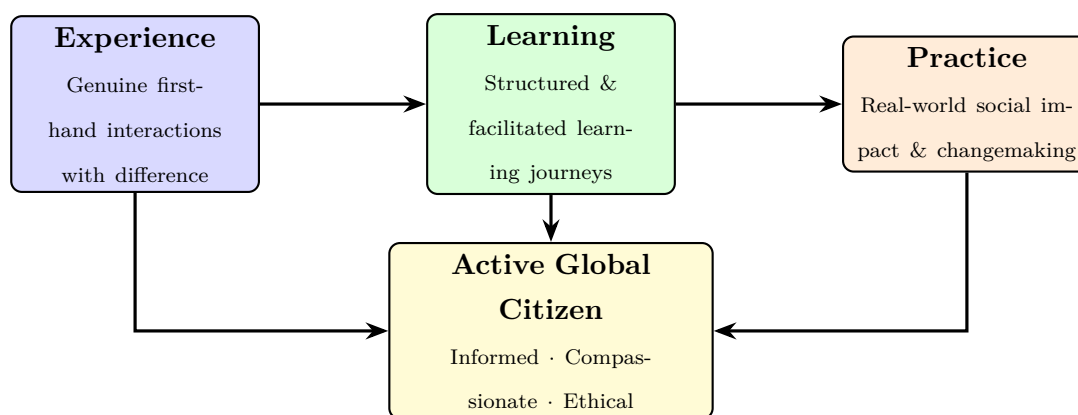


Figure 1.3: AFS Theory of Change: experience, learning and practice combine to develop active global citizens (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2026).

The AFS Framework for Active Global Citizenship identifies four development areas that support this: valuing and belonging to a common and diverse world, inquiring critically about the world beyond immediate environments, understanding and relating to others across differences and taking action towards collective well-being.

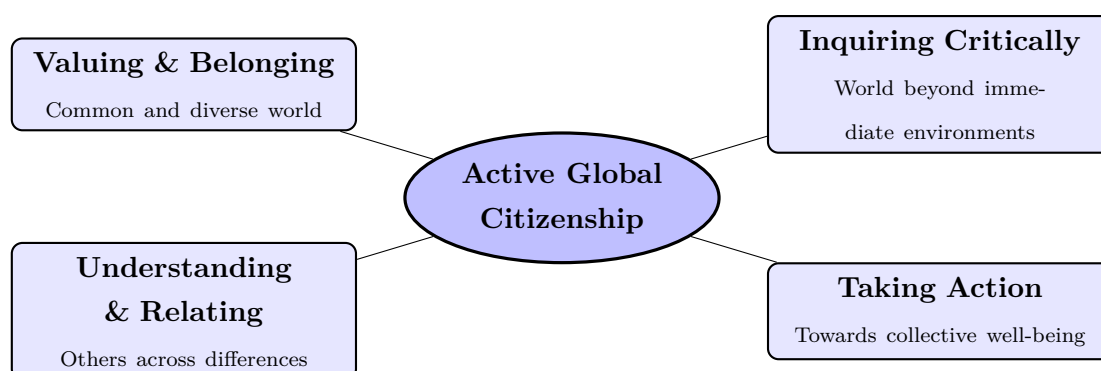


Figure 1.4: AFS Framework for Active Global Citizenship: four development areas (AFS Intercultural Programs, 2026).

How AFS works: the role of volunteers

AFS as an organisation would not function without volunteers. Volunteers are everyday people: former exchange students, parents, educators and intercultural enthusiasts who give their time because they believe in AFS's mission. They are not paid staff, but they contribute out of personal motivation: a desire to support young people and families, to give back to a programme they once benefited from or to be part of an international community. Without this volunteer backbone, AFS could not deliver its programmes at the scale it does.

AFS Sweden's camps

One of the most visible ways volunteers contribute is through the orientation camps. AFS Sweden organises six national orientation camps each year. These camps are key moments of learning and reflection that help students navigate cultural adjustment, personal growth and the different phases of their exchange, known as the AFS Student Learning Journey. In addition to the in-person camps, students complete an online pre-departure learning component organised by AFS International before their first camp.

The six camps follow this annual cycle:

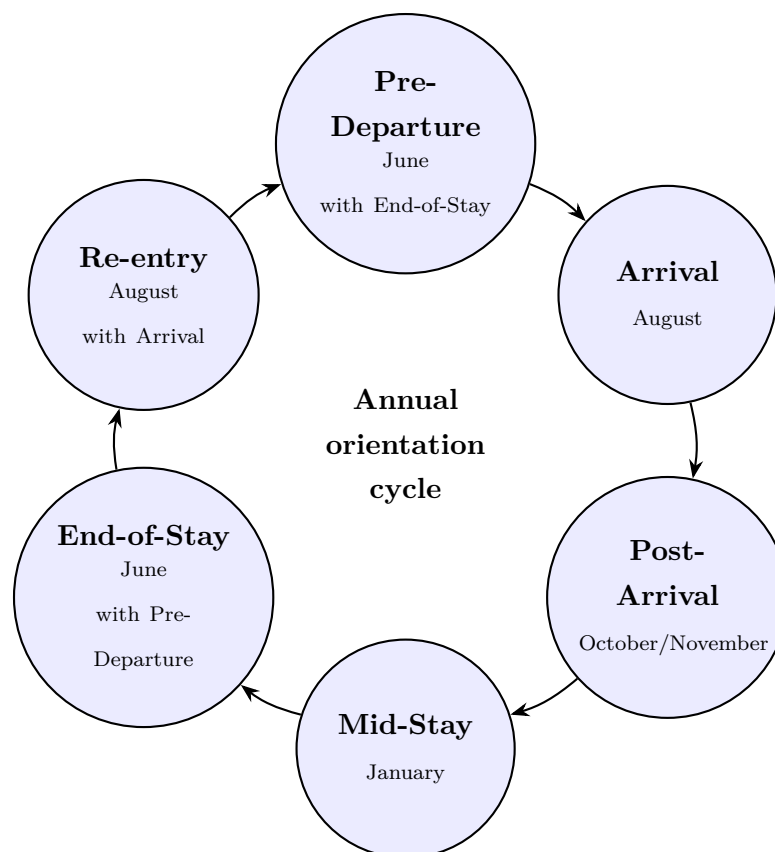


Figure 1.5: Annual cycle of AFS Sweden's national orientation camps.

How a camp is organised

Camps are planned and delivered through a combination of staff, coordinators and volunteers. A national pool of camp coordinators works closely with AFS staff and is responsible for organising and planning all camps across the year, communicating with students, families and volunteers, recruiting and supporting the volunteer team, designing the camp programme and workshops and collecting feedback for continuous quality improvement.

At the camp itself, volunteers fill several distinct roles:

- **Camp coordinator:** oversees overall planning, coordination and delivery of the camp, working alongside staff. Typically one coordinator focuses on logistics and communications, while another focuses on content and workshop design.
- **Facilitator:** experienced volunteers who lead workshops and group sessions with students.
- **Trainee facilitator:** first-time volunteers paired with an experienced facilitator to learn the role in practice.
- **Individual talks volunteer:** volunteers who conduct one-on-one conversations with students, offering personal guidance and support.
- **Cooking team:** where cooking facilities are available, a small team of volunteers prepares meals during the camp.

Organisational context and the Nordic restructuring

In August 2019, AFS Sweden merged with AFS Denmark as part of a Nordic restructuring intended to create a larger, more capable organisation. Following the merger, the organisation was renamed from *AFS Interkulturell Utbildning* to *AFS Interkultur Sverige* and the head office was relocated to Copenhagen in December 2025. While the merger was intended to unlock new organisational capacity, it resulted in a significantly smaller operational team supporting Swedish activities from abroad. The volunteer network, which continues to operate locally across large parts of Sweden, has consequently taken on greater responsibility for programme delivery, including the camp programme, with less staff support available for coordination, logistics and volunteer management (AFS Interkultur Sverige, n.d.).

The camp programme was historically coordinated by SLUG, a national volunteer-led group responsible for camp planning, volunteer recruitment and camp programme quality. SLUG consisted of a small number of active members and operated with limited formal documentation or institutional memory systems (AFS Interkultur Sverige, 2026). Following a meeting with SLUG volunteers in May 2026, it was decided to discontinue the national group. As a planned future structure, coordination responsibilities will be distributed across two newly formed groups.

- The first is the **National Pool of Trainers (NPOT)**: a national group of experienced volunteers responsible for developing and delivering trainings for other volunteers within AFS Sweden. These trainings support volunteers in their roles, strengthen the quality and consistency of the volunteer experience and help people get the most out of their contribution. NPOT volunteers also develop new training materials and

deliver workshops at orientation camps. Similar structures exist at the Scandinavian level (SPOT) and the European level (EPOT).

- The second is the **Pool of Camp Coordinators**: a group of volunteer camp coordinators who collectively plan and coordinate all six orientation camps across the year, ensuring coherence and continuity across the entire annual camp programme.

Together, these two groups are intended to create a more sustainable and clearly defined volunteer structure for the camp programme going forward.

1.2 Problem statement

Despite the critical importance of camps to the AFS Sweden experience, the volunteer structure supporting them faces several interconnected challenges. Preliminary conversations with SLUG members and the AFS Sweden board revealed concerns about knowledge loss during volunteer turnover, workload concentration among a small number of individuals, unclear role definitions and weak coordination between the previous Stockholm-based office and Swedish volunteers.

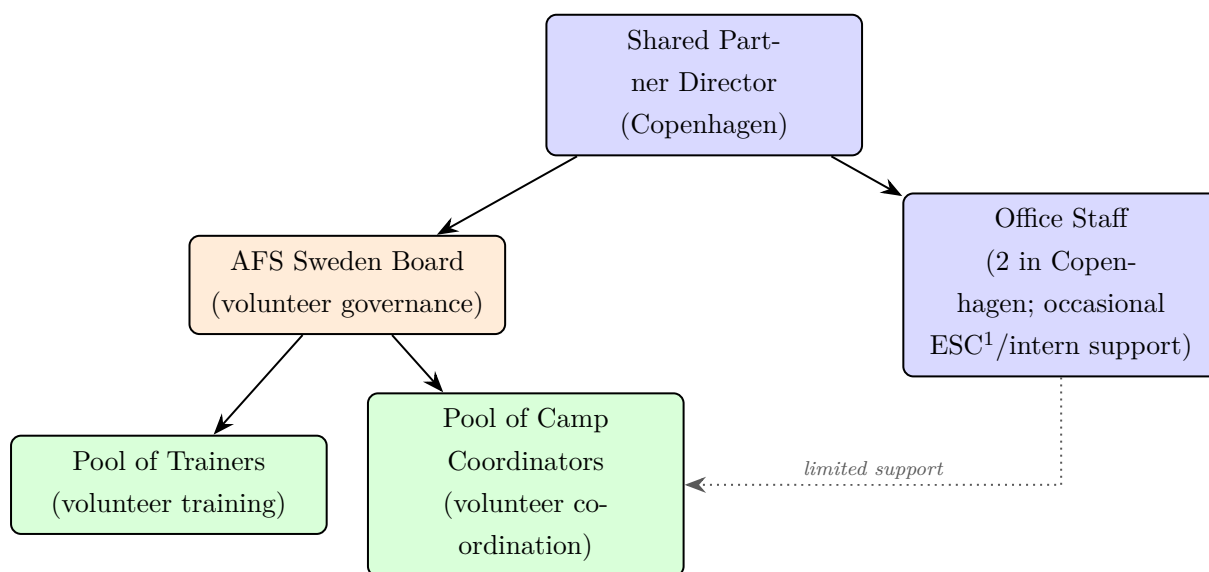


Figure 1.6: Organisational structure of AFS Sweden showing the relationship between paid staff (Copenhagen) and the Swedish volunteer network.

These challenges are not new, but the recent organisational restructuring has amplified their urgency: with fewer staff resources, the sustainability of the camp programme depends more than ever on a well-functioning volunteer structure.

Without intervention, AFS Sweden risks entering a negative cycle in which experienced

¹European Solidarity Corps.

volunteers burn out, institutional knowledge is lost and new volunteers lack the support structures needed to step into leadership roles, ultimately threatening the quality and continuity of the camp programme itself.

1.3 Research objective and questions

The objective of this research is to analyse the current volunteer structure supporting AFS Sweden's camp programme and to develop evidence-based recommendations for a more sustainable model. The central research question is:

RQ²: *How can AFS Sweden develop a sustainable camp volunteer structure through co-creation between volunteers and the office, given its current cross-border organisational context?*

This central question is operationalised through four sub-questions:

SQ1³: *What constitutes a sustainable volunteer structure for camp-based programmes and which models and practices are relevant in the context of AFS?*

SQ2: *What structural challenges and motivational factors shape the current camp volunteer experience in AFS Sweden?*

SQ3: *How does the cross-border organisational structure between Sweden and Denmark affect volunteer support, coordination and engagement?*

SQ4: *How can volunteers and the office co-create tools and practices that address the identified challenges and strengthen the volunteer structure?*

1.4 Justification

This research is justified on three grounds. First, organisational urgency: AFS Sweden's 2026 summer camp season begins in June and SLUG is currently planning with an uncertain volunteer base and no formal onboarding process. Second, academic relevance: while volunteer management literature is well-developed, research on knowledge transfer in volunteer-led programme delivery within intercultural exchange organisations remains scarce. Third, practical applicability: the findings and product will be directly deployed during the 2026 camp season, providing an immediate feedback loop.

²Research question.

³Sub question.

1.5 Methodology overview

This study employs a qualitative research design combining desk research with semi-structured interviews. The desk research phase synthesises academic literature on volunteer management, knowledge transfer and organisational sustainability, alongside internal AFS documents and comparative case analyses of similar organisations (YFU, AFS Norway, AFS Denmark). The field research phase consists of 13 semi-structured interviews with three stakeholder groups: camp volunteers ($n = 8$), SLUG members ($n = 4$) and a board representative ($n = 1$). Data analysis follows the six-phase thematic analysis framework of (Clarke & Braun, 2006). A detailed methodological justification is provided in Chapter 3.

The choice for qualitative interviews rather than a survey is driven by the exploratory nature of the research, the small population of active camp volunteers and the need for in-depth understanding of lived experiences and tacit knowledge structures.

1.6 Scope and delimitations

This research focuses exclusively on the volunteer structure supporting AFS Sweden's residential camp programme. It does not address hosting family coordination, school programme management or financial governance. Geographically, the primary focus is AFS Sweden, with comparative references to AFS Norway and AFS Denmark drawn from the desk research phase. The target time horizon for recommendations is 2026–2028, with an emphasis on implementability during the 2026 summer season.

Key limitations acknowledged at the outset include: (1) the sample consists exclusively of currently active volunteers, which may introduce survivorship bias (Elston, 2021; see Section 3.1.4). (2) Jorren Almey, student, is a former AFS exchange student, requiring transparency about positionality.

Chapter 2

Building a sustainable volunteer structure: theoretical and comparative foundations

This chapter synthesises the academic and organisational knowledge relevant to the research questions. It moves from broad theoretical frameworks (Section 2.1) to AFS-specific internal analysis (Section 2.2) and concludes with comparative insights from similar organisations (Section 2.3). Together, these sections establish the analytical lens through which the field research findings in Chapter 3 are interpreted.

2.1 Volunteer management, motivation and retention

2.1.1 Defining sustainable volunteer structures

A sustainable volunteer structure refers to an organisational framework that enables continuous, quality-driven programme delivery without depending on the presence of specific individuals (Kaur, Smith, Pazour & Schumacher, 2020). This definition encompasses three dimensions: structural sustainability (formalised roles, governance and handover mechanisms), knowledge sustainability (systems for capturing, storing and transferring institutional knowledge) and relational sustainability (recruitment pipelines, retention mechanisms and community-building practices).

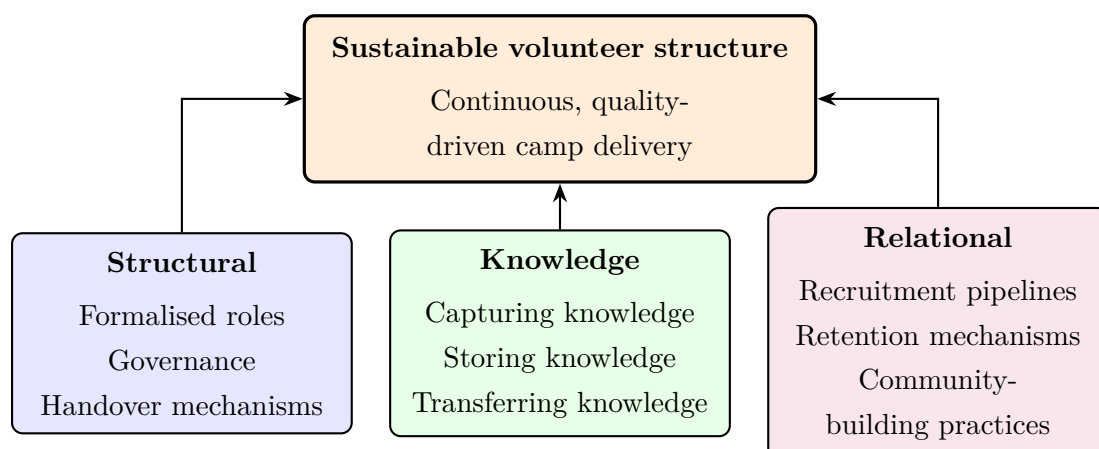


Figure 2.1: Three dimensions of a sustainable volunteer structure.

Lee & Brudney (2012) argue that volunteer programme sustainability depends on the degree to which organisations invest in volunteer management infrastructure, not merely in attracting volunteers, but in creating the conditions for them to contribute effectively over time. This perspective is particularly relevant for AFS Sweden, where the volunteer base is small and the consequences of individual departures are disproportionately large.

2.1.2 Volunteer motivation: self-determination theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Ryan and Deci (2000), is one of the most widely cited frameworks in motivational psychology. At its core, SDT distinguishes between different types of motivation along a continuum from *extrinsic* (driven by external rewards or pressures) to *intrinsic* (driven by genuine interest and inherent satisfaction). Crucially, SDT argues that this is not a fixed binary: through a process called *internalisation*, people can progressively take on externally introduced behaviours and come to experience them as their own. This makes SDT particularly useful for understanding voluntary behaviour, where pay and formal incentives are absent and sustaining engagement depends on internal drivers.

The theory rests on three basic psychological needs whose satisfaction is held to be essential for sustained intrinsic motivation:

- **Autonomy** refers to the sense of volition and self-endorsement: the feeling that one is acting from genuine choice rather than obligation or pressure. Autonomy does not mean acting alone; it means that the individual psychologically owns their actions.
- **Competence** refers to the experience of mastery and effectiveness: the sense that one possesses and is developing the skills needed to produce meaningful outcomes. Without perceived competence, motivation tends to erode even when people initially care about a task.
- **Relatedness** refers to the feeling of genuine connection to others: belonging to a community and mattering to the people within it. In voluntary settings, this is often the primary ‘glue’ that holds participation together over time.

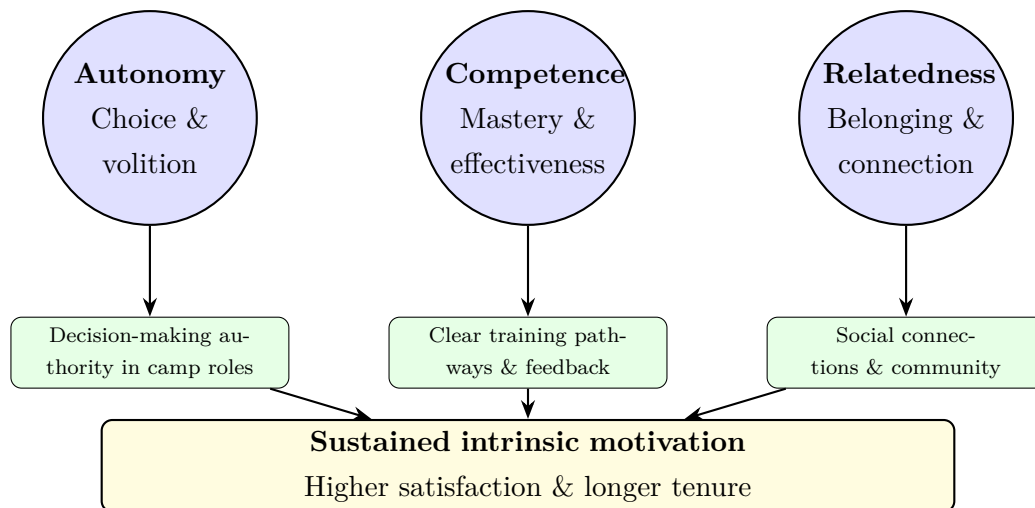


Figure 2.2: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) applied to volunteer contexts: three basic psychological needs and their organisational implications based on Ryan & Deci (2000).

SDT has been applied and empirically tested across a wide range of contexts beyond volunteering. In education, Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier and Ryan (1991) conducted a series of field experiments in schools and found that teachers who supported student autonomy by providing rationale for tasks, acknowledging feelings and minimising pressure, produced students with significantly higher intrinsic motivation and better long-term academic outcomes compared to more controlling teaching styles. In healthcare, Williams and Deci (1998) applied SDT to patients managing chronic illness, finding that patients whose doctors supported their autonomy were more likely to adhere to treatment plans and maintain behaviour changes over time. In the workplace, Gagné and Deci (2005) reviewed a substantial body of evidence showing that employees in autonomy-supportive environments showed greater job satisfaction, lower turnover and higher performance, even when controlling for pay and other extrinsic factors.

Applied specifically to volunteer contexts, Gagné (2003) studied volunteers in a community organisation and demonstrated that those whose three SDT needs were met reported higher satisfaction and longer tenure. In the youth volunteering context specifically, Haski-Leventhal & Bargal (2008) found that volunteers progressed through distinct socialisation stages and that organisations supporting autonomy during the “involvement” stage saw significantly higher retention rates.

These findings carry direct relevance for AFS Sweden. The informal progression from returnee to camp chief closely mirrors the socialisation stages Haski-Leventhal and Bargal describe and the analysis in later sections will use SDT’s three needs as an evaluative lens to assess where AFS Sweden’s current volunteer structure supports or undermines sustained engagement.

2.1.3 Knowledge management in volunteer organisations

The challenge of knowledge management in volunteer organisations is fundamentally different from that in professional settings. Volunteers typically serve for shorter periods, have no contractual obligation to document their work and often acquire operational knowledge informally through experience rather than training (Hager & Brudney, 2004). This creates a reliance on *tacit knowledge*: knowledge embedded in individual experience that is difficult to articulate or transfer (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Nonaka and Takeuchi's SECI model describes four modes of knowledge conversion: socialisation (tacit to tacit, where knowledge is shared through shared experience and observation), externalisation (tacit to explicit, where individuals articulate their knowledge into documents, templates or procedures), combination (explicit to explicit, where codified knowledge is reorganised and integrated across systems) and internalisation (explicit to tacit, where individuals absorb documented knowledge through practice and learning-by-doing). In professional organisations, all four modes typically operate in a continuous spiral. In volunteer organisations, however, the socialisation mode tends to dominate: knowledge is passed through informal mentoring and shared experience. However, this mode is inherently fragile, as it depends on direct interpersonal contact and breaks down when experienced volunteers leave without transmitting their knowledge to successors. Research on knowledge management in non-profit organisations has consistently identified this over-reliance on socialisation as a key vulnerability (Hager & Brudney, 2004), particularly in organisations with high volunteer turnover.

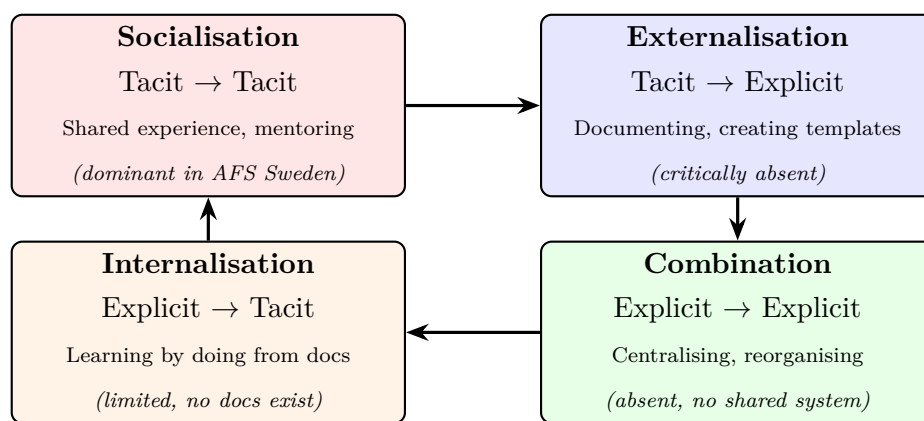


Figure 2.3: Nonaka & Takeuchi's (1995) SECI model of knowledge conversion, annotated with AFS Sweden's current position. The organisation relies almost exclusively on socialisation, with the other three modes critically underdeveloped.

For AFS Sweden, this theoretical perspective suggests that the current reliance on tacit, person-dependent knowledge transfer is a structural vulnerability. Moving towards a model that incorporates stronger externalisation (documenting processes, creating tem-

plates) and combination (centralising resources) may be necessary to achieve knowledge sustainability.

2.2 AFS frameworks and internal analysis

2.2.1 The AFS volunteer engagement manifesto

AFS Intercultural Programs is developing¹ a Volunteer Engagement Manifesto comprising nineteen mindsets that guide volunteer management across the global network (Welter, Barrinuevo, Bertelli & Musyoki, 2025). The manifesto organises these mindsets into four thematic areas: Philosophy of Volunteerism, Practice of Engagement, Growth and Development and Leadership and Culture. Reflecting a progression from organisational beliefs to operational systems and, ultimately, to a culture of sustained movement building.

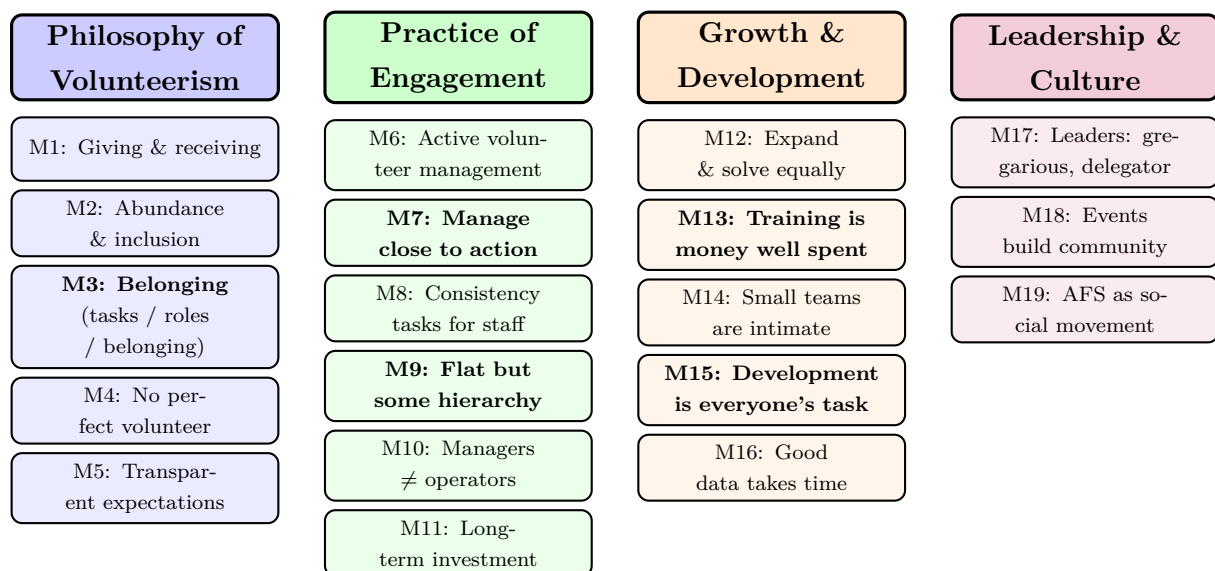


Figure 2.4: Overview of all nineteen mindsets from the AFS Volunteer Engagement Manifesto (Welter et al., 2025), organised by thematic area. Mindsets most relevant to this study are shown in bold.

Three mindsets are of particular relevance to the present research. First, Mindset 13 (“Resources Spent on Volunteer Training Are Money Well Spent”) positions structured development as a strategic multiplier rather than an operational cost, directly supporting the SDT dimension of competence: when volunteers gain skills and confidence, intrinsic motivation is reinforced. Second, Mindset 15 (“Volunteer Development Is Everyone’s Task”) distributes responsibility for growth across the organisation rather than confining it to a dedicated role, which resonates with the co-creation principle underpinning Subquestion 4. Third, Mindset 3 (“Some People Want Tasks. Some People Want Roles.

¹A draft was shared with the researcher.

All Want Belonging”) recognises that beneath surface-level engagement preferences lies a universal need for relatedness, the third pillar of Self-Determination Theory.

Additionally, Mindset 9 (“We Love Flat Structures, But Some Hierarchy Is Necessary”) and Mindset 7 (“Volunteer Management Should Happen Where the Action Takes Place”) carry structural implications directly relevant to AFS Sweden’s cross-border coordination challenges, as examined in Sub-questions 1 and 3.

However, the gap between aspiration and implementation varies significantly across AFS national partners. The degree to which AFS Sweden has operationalised these mindsets is examined through the field research in Chapter 3.

2.2.2 SLUG: structure, history and current challenges

SLUG was established in 2019 as a national-level volunteer group tasked with camp coordination, quality assurance and volunteer recruitment. According to internal documentation (Wahlqvist, 2026), the group operated with between three and seven active individual volunteer members, with membership determined informally through self-selection rather than a structured appointment process. The challenges SLUG faced during its operation included unclear boundaries between its coordinating role and the operational responsibilities of individual camp teams, inconsistent documentation practices, limited visibility among newer volunteers and a lack of formal handover procedures when members rotated out of the group.

Following a meeting with SLUG volunteers in May 2026, it was decided to discontinue the group. As a planned future structure, coordination responsibilities will be distributed across two newly formed groups. The first is the National Pool of Trainers (NPOT), a national group of experienced volunteers responsible for developing and delivering trainings for other volunteers within AFS Sweden, supporting volunteer roles, strengthening quality and consistency across the volunteer experience. The second is the Pool of Camp Coordinators, a group of volunteer camp coordinators who collectively plan and coordinate all six orientation camps across the year, ensuring coherence and continuity across the annual camp programme.

2.2.3 The volunteer pipeline: from returnee to camp chief

AFS Sweden’s camp volunteer pipeline follows an informal progression: returnee (former exchange student) → trainee (observing role) → workshop leader → camp chief.

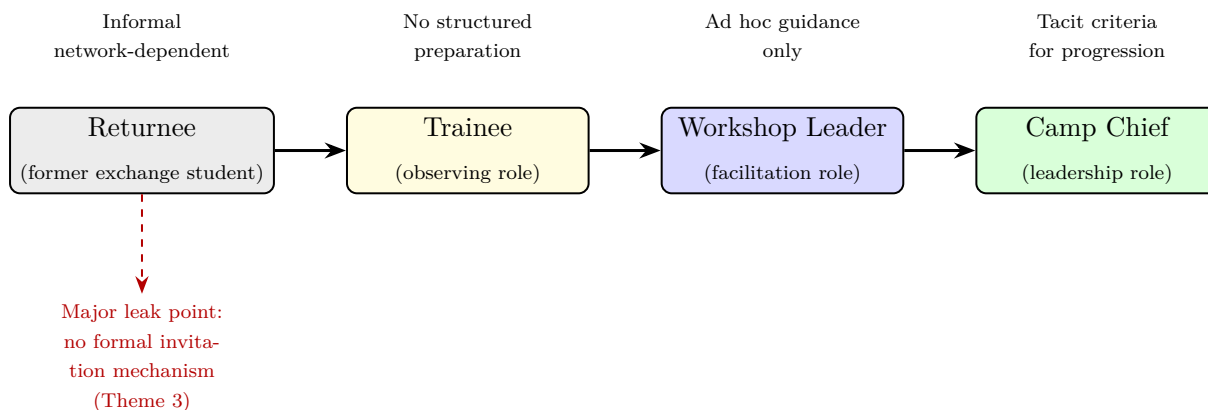


Figure 2.5: Current (informal) volunteer pipeline from returnee to camp chief, showing the major leak point and lack of formalised progression criteria at each stage.

This pathway is neither formally documented nor consistently communicated. The criteria for progression between stages are tacit, residing primarily in the judgement of experienced volunteers and SLUG members.

This informality has both advantages (flexibility, low barriers to entry) and disadvantages (unpredictability, potential for exclusion, quality inconsistency). The tension between formalisation and flexibility is a central theme that runs through both the desk and field research.

2.3 Comparative analysis: lessons from similar organisations

2.3.1 YFU

YFU² operates a comparable intercultural exchange model with volunteer-led orientation events. A key difference is YFU's implementation of a standardised Volunteer Coordinator role at regional level, supported by a central training curriculum and digital resource library (Youth For Understanding, 2026). This structure is designed to reduce dependency on individual volunteers by embedding knowledge in organisational systems rather than personal networks. Rather than relying on experienced individuals to informally pass on know-how, the coordinator role creates a defined point of responsibility, while the centralised curriculum and resource library ensure that essential knowledge remains accessible regardless of volunteer turnover. In theory, this approach addresses one of the core vulnerabilities of volunteer-driven organisations: the loss of institutional knowledge when key individuals leave. By anchoring expertise in documented systems and standardised

²Youth For Understanding.

roles, continuity becomes structurally supported rather than person-dependent. However, it should be noted that this assessment is based primarily on how the model is designed and presented. How effectively these structures function in practice; whether volunteers engage meaningfully with the training curriculum, how consistently the coordinator role is enacted across regions and whether the resource library is actively maintained and used, lies beyond the scope of this analysis. The gap between a well-designed system and its real-world implementation is a recurring challenge in volunteer organisations and YFU's model is not necessarily exempt from this.

2.3.2 AFS Norway and AFS Denmark

The most directly comparable cases are AFS Norway and AFS Denmark, which share AFS Sweden's organisational structure, Scandinavian cultural context and direct experience with the Nordic merger. Both partner organisations have operated under the same shared Partner Director based in the Danish office in Copenhagen, a consequence of the restructuring. Data collected through the Erasmus+ cross-Nordic exchange ($n = 15$) provides concrete insight into how each country approaches camp coordination and where shared challenges persist.

Multiple Norwegian respondents with over five years of experience describe established practices including pre-camp planning meetings with all leaders, shared digital workspaces (Google Drive, Padlet, Slack). One respondent highlighted that Norway maintains a logically structured shared drive containing camp materials going back multiple years, enabling new coordinators to build on previous editions rather than starting from scratch. Norway has also implemented a "community agreement" method in which exchange students collaboratively define camp norms, a participatory approach that reflects a more formalised programme design culture.

This structural maturity appears to have contributed to a broader organisational trajectory. Despite operating under the same shared Partner Director as AFS Sweden, AFS Norway has strengthened to the point where it will transition to its own dedicated director at the end of May 2026. This development is analytically significant: it suggests that the shared management model was transitional and that the volunteer and organisational infrastructure Norway built during this period; structured knowledge systems, standardised planning processes, content investment, may have been a factor in reaching that independence. For AFS Sweden, which remains under shared management, this raises the question of what structural investments in the volunteer network could similarly strengthen the organisation's capacity.

Despite these strengths, Norwegian respondents identified challenges that closely mirror AFS Sweden's situation. Recruiting sufficient volunteers remains a persistent difficulty

and the logistical burden on coordinators is described as a significant barrier to attracting and retaining senior leaders. One experienced coordinator observed that volunteer shortages create a self-reinforcing cycle: existing volunteers are pushed to assume more responsibility than they would prefer, which limits their capacity to mentor newer volunteers and constrains the development pipeline. This pattern directly parallels the workload concentration identified in AFS Sweden (see Section 3.2).

AFS Denmark presents a mixed but instructive picture. On the organisational side, Danish respondents describe a well-maintained shared Google Drive with historical camp documentation, a dedicated planning committee that absorbs logistical tasks, freeing coordinators to focus on participants and volunteer management and a consistent practice of structured daily evaluations with volunteers during camps. One respondent highlighted a standardised camp opening procedure in which responsibilities, expectations and rules are explicitly communicated to all volunteers, a practice currently absent from AFS Sweden's camp operations. However, Danish respondents also report difficulties with volunteer recruitment and equitable workload distribution that echo the challenges identified in Sweden.

Three cross-cutting patterns emerge from the comparative data. First, knowledge management through shared digital workspaces is more developed in Norway and Denmark than in Sweden, although even in those partner organisations, the practice depends on individual initiative rather than formal organisational mandate. Second, volunteer recruitment and retention is a universal challenge across all three Nordic chapters, no country has fully resolved this. Third, the logistical burden of camp coordination is consistently cited as a barrier to sustained volunteer engagement, suggesting that a sustainable structure must reduce this burden systemically rather than simply redistribute it among volunteers.

These comparative findings reinforce two conclusions relevant to the present study. The challenges AFS Sweden faces are not isolated but form part of a broader Nordic pattern, which suggests structural rather than incidental causes. At the same time, practical solutions already exist within the network: structured drives, planning committees, community agreements, daily volunteer evaluations that AFS Sweden could adopt and adapt without developing entirely new systems.

2.3.3 Comparative summary

This table reveals a clear gradient in structural maturity across the four organisations. Among the Nordic AFS partner organisations, Norway and Denmark demonstrate the most developed practices, particularly in digital knowledge management and planning structures, which may have contributed to Norway's upcoming transition to an independent Partner Director. Denmark occupies a middle position: while it lacks Norway's

Element	YFU International	AFS Norway	AFS Denmark	AFS Sweden
Source	Desk research (published documents)	Erasmus+ Exchange (2026)	Erasmus+ Exchange (2026)	Erasmus+ Exchange (2026) + field research
Shared digital workspace	Centralised digital resource library	Structured Google Drive with multi-year archive, Padlet, Slack	Shared Google Drive with historical camp documentation	No centralised system — fragmented across personal drives and WhatsApp
Camp planning structure	Standardised regional coordinator model with central training curriculum	Pre-camp meetings with all leaders, recent content revision	Dedicated planning committee handling logistics, set model reused per camp	SLUG + camp chiefs, pre-camp meetings with all leaders
Volunteer onboarding	Formal curriculum-based onboarding programme	Structured camp openings; mentoring expected but inconsistently applied	Standardised camp opening with explicit roles and expectations communicated	Informal; no structured introduction for new volunteers, but trainee system
Knowledge transfer & handover	Formalised handover protocol at regional level	Templates in shared drive; materials accessible to successors	Historical documentation available; planning model provides continuity	Person-dependent; knowledge lost when individuals leave
Volunteer evaluation during camps	Not specified in available documentation	Not explicitly mentioned in survey data	Structured daily evaluation sessions with volunteers	Form afterwards
Volunteer recruitment & retention	Not specified in available documentation	Persistent challenge; shortages lead to overburdening and limited mentoring	Recruitment of sufficient volunteers cited as main difficulty	Persistent challenge; network-dependent, no formal mechanism
Workload distribution	Distributed through regional coordinator structure	Self-reinforcing imbalance; senior volunteers carry disproportionate load	Uneven distribution identified as key challenge	Concentrated among small number of experienced individuals
Organ. autonomy	Independent national chapters with central support	Transitioning to own Partner Director (May 2026)	Hosts shared Partner Director	Operates under shared Partner Director in Copenhagen

Best practice
Works but could improve
Pain point
Not specified

Table 2.1: Comparative overview of volunteer structure elements across organisations, colour-coded by structural maturity.

multi-year digital archive, its dedicated planning committee and structured daily volunteer evaluations represent practical solutions that AFS Sweden has not yet adopted. AFS Sweden consistently shows the least formalised approach across all elements, with key processes remaining person-dependent and informal.

Notably, the one element shared across all four organisations is the challenge of volunteer recruitment and workload distribution. This suggests that structural formalisation alone does not resolve recruitment challenges, but it does appear to reduce the negative consequences of limited volunteer numbers by ensuring that knowledge is preserved, planning is replicable and the burden on individual coordinators is mitigated through systems rather than absorbed through personal effort.

For the present study, these comparative findings point towards a realistic ambition: AFS Sweden need not build a YFU-scale infrastructure, but can draw on concrete, tested prac-

tices from within its own Nordic network, particularly Norway's shared workspace model and Denmark's planning committee structure as a foundation for the recommendations developed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3

Field Research: voices from AFS Sweden's camp volunteers

This chapter presents the methodology and findings of the qualitative field research. It begins with a detailed methodological justification (Section 3.1), followed by a thematic presentation of findings (Sections 3.2–3.6). Each theme is analysed in relation to the theoretical frameworks established in Chapter 2, demonstrating the triangulation between desk and field research.

3.1 Methodology

3.1.1 Research design

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design using semi-structured interviews. This design was chosen for three reasons: (1) the research questions require in-depth understanding of subjective experiences and tacit knowledge structures, which are not capturable through surveys. (2) The active camp volunteer population is small, making quantitative methods statistically inappropriate. (3) The exploratory nature of the study demands flexibility to follow emerging themes during data collection.

3.1.2 Sample and sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was used to select respondents from three distinct stakeholder groups: camp volunteers, SLUG members and a board representative. This ensured that the analysis captured multiple perspectives on the same organisational system, including operational, coordination and governance-level experiences.

3.1.3 Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between March and April 2026 via Microsoft Teams video calls. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed using Teams' built-in automatic transcription tool. All transcripts were subsequently manually reviewed and corrected by the researcher to ensure accuracy.

Code	Group	Role	Years exp.	Duration (min)
R1	Camp Volunteer	Workshop facilitator	2	42
R2	Camp Volunteer	Camp chief	4	58
R3	Camp Volunteer	Trainee	1	35
R4	Camp Volunteer	Workshop facilitator	3	47
R5	Camp Volunteer	Camp chief	5	61
R6	Camp Volunteer	Workshop facilitator	2	39
R7	Camp Volunteer	Trainee	1	33
R8	Camp Volunteer	Former camp chief	6	52
S1	SLUG Member	SLUG coordinator	3	55
S2	SLUG Member	Camp quality lead	2	48
S3	SLUG Member	Recruitment lead	1	41
S4	SLUG Member	SLUG member	2	44
B1	Board Member	Board liaison for volunteers, former SLUG	8	46

Table 3.1: Overview of interview respondents. All names have been replaced with codes to ensure anonymity.

Two interview guides were developed to reflect the distinct perspectives of the stakeholder groups. The camp volunteer guide (Appendix A) was designed for a maximum duration of 30 minutes and structured around seven thematic blocks: background and role understanding, camp structure and culture, workload and support, collaboration with the office and board, knowledge transfer and continuity and future reflection. Questions were adapted depending on the respondent's experience level; newer volunteers were prompted more on support and preparation, while experienced volunteers were asked to reflect on structural patterns and knowledge loss. A separate SLUG member guide (Appendix B) was more extensive, allowing for 30 to 60 minutes and covered additional dimensions including SLUG's internal structure and role division, meeting culture, training and development and the relationship between SLUG and the AFS office. The board member (B1) was interviewed using the SLUG guide, as this respondent is a former SLUG member whose perspective spans both the governance and operational levels. Both guides employed open-ended questions with concrete example prompts to avoid abstract responses and follow-up probing questions were used throughout to explore emerging themes in depth.

Data analysis followed Clarke & Braun's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. This involved familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts, systematic initial coding, grouping codes into potential themes, reviewing themes against the coded extracts, defining and naming final themes and producing the analytical narrative presented in

Sections 3.2 through 3.6. This resulted in five overarching themes that structure the findings below. The analytical process is summarised in Figure 3.1.

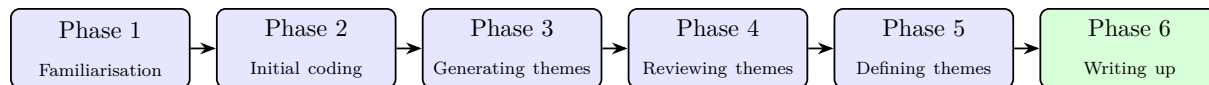


Figure 3.1: The six-phase thematic analysis framework Clarke & Braun (2006) used to analyse the interview data.

3.1.4 Ethical considerations and limitations

All respondents provided informed consent prior to participation. Interviews were voluntary and respondents could withdraw at any time. Data has been anonymised using codes (Table 3.1). Recordings and transcripts are stored in a shared OneDrive folder that is only accessible through the link included in the proof of field research and requires an Artevelde Microsoft account. This access restriction supports compliance with Artevelde’s data management guidelines.

Three methodological limitations must be acknowledged:

- *Survivorship bias*: the sample consists exclusively of currently or recently active volunteers. Those who left AFS Sweden’s volunteer network, potentially because of the very structural problems this BAP¹ investigates, are not represented.
- *Social desirability*: as a former AFS exchange student, the researcher’s positionality may have influenced respondents to give more positive accounts. This was mitigated through the use of neutral, open-ended questions and explicit encouragement of critical perspectives.
- *Sample size*: while 13 interviews provide rich qualitative data, findings cannot be statistically generalised to all AFS partner organisations globally. However, the analytical generalisability to similar small volunteer-led organisations is argued where supported by the comparative desk research.

3.2 Theme 1: Governance gaps and workload concentration

The most consistently raised concern across all three stakeholder groups was the concentration of operational responsibility among a small number of experienced volunteers. Eleven of 13 respondents described situations in which one or two individuals carried a disproportionate share of planning, coordination and decision-making.

¹Bachelor’s Project.

“It always comes down to the same three people. If they’re not there, nobody knows what to do” (R5, camp volunteer, 5 years).

Other respondents described the same pattern as a personal and organisational sustainability risk:

“The responsibility has been a bit too big sometimes, with a bit of a feeling that if I’m not doing this, then nobody will” (R2, SLUG member, 5+ years).

“I see the risk within AFS in general that we have too few volunteers and each time we get a new volunteer, it’s easy to just pile a lot of tasks on them” (R5, camp volunteer, 3 years).

“I was camp chief of seven camps in a row while moving, studying and starting university” (R1, SLUG member, 4+ years).

This pattern is directly linked to the absence of formalised role definitions. Without documented role descriptions, the boundary between a camp chief’s responsibilities and those of SLUG remains ambiguous. Several respondents noted that newer volunteers were reluctant to take on responsibilities because they did not understand what the roles entailed or what authority they carried:

“I wanted to help more, but I didn’t know what was expected. Nobody explained what a workshop leader actually does before the camp starts” (R3, camp volunteer).

Connecting this to the desk research, the pattern aligns with Hager & Brudne (2004) observation that organisations which fail to invest in volunteer management infrastructure, including formalised job descriptions, regular supervision and structured training, tend to develop person-dependent structures where institutional knowledge concentrates in the few individuals who step into the resulting vacuum. Their research across hundreds of non-profit organisations showed that the adoption of even basic management practices such as written role descriptions and regular performance communication significantly improved volunteer retention rates. The SDT framework further illuminates why this pattern is self-reinforcing: without clear role descriptions, new volunteers cannot develop a sense of competence, which reduces their willingness to take on leadership positions, which in turn perpetuates the concentration of workload among experienced volunteers.

3.3 Theme 2: Knowledge loss and the “starting from scratch” cycle

Nine respondents described experiences of “starting from scratch” when beginning a new camp cycle. This manifested in practical terms: contact lists lost when a camp chief changed email providers, planning documents stored in personal Google Drives that became inaccessible after a volunteer left and evaluation feedback that was never documented or transmitted to the next team.

“Every year we reinvent the wheel. I know the camp two years ago had a really good workshop on culture shock, but nobody wrote down how they did it” (S2, SLUG quality lead).

Several respondents explicitly linked this knowledge loss to information being held by individuals rather than by an accessible system:

“Right now it’s just me talking to people. I hold a lot of information” (R1, SLUG member, 4+ years).

“When I was the camp chief and had to find out how Global Link, the back layer of ONE AFS, worked, I had to go from person to person to figure out what to do” (R6, camp volunteer, 2 years).

This finding corresponds directly to the SECI² model’s diagnostic: AFS Sweden’s knowledge transfer operates almost exclusively through socialisation (tacit to tacit), with minimal externalisation (tacit to explicit). When the interpersonal chain breaks, because a key volunteer moves away, loses interest or burns out, the knowledge disappears entirely. The comparative analysis (Section 2.3) showed that AFS Norway has partially addressed this through a shared digital workspace with standardised templates, demonstrating that the same organisational culture can support more explicit knowledge management systems.

3.4 Theme 3: Social connection as retention driver

When asked what motivates them to continue volunteering, 12 of 13 respondents cited social connection as their primary reason. The sense of community, shared identity as AFS alumni and the emotional reward of working with exchange students emerged as the dominant motivational factors:

“I stay because of the people. The moment the camp starts and you see the students’ faces, that’s why I come back every year” (R6, camp volunteer).

²Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination and Internalisation (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

For some respondents, this motivation began already during their own returnee experience, where seeing enthusiastic volunteers made the volunteer role feel attractive and attainable:

“It was going to be fun because when we had our returnee camp, all the volunteers were so hyped and so excited. It just made me think: oh, I also want to do that” (R8, camp volunteer, 1.5 years).

The same relational motivation was also described as a long-term retention factor:

“Something that’s lacking now, but was there when I was very active, was activities for volunteers, because that really motivated me. I found friends within the organisation and that made it more fun” (R3, board member, former SLUG member).

“The culture is like best friends almost, like we’ve known each other for ages. We always try to include everyone” (R8, camp volunteer, 1.5 years).

In SDT terms, the relatedness need is strongly fulfilled within the camp volunteer community. However, this fulfilment is episodic, concentrated during camp events themselves, rather than sustained throughout the year. Between camps, several respondents described feeling isolated and disconnected from both the volunteer network and the office.

Critically, the pipeline from returnee to active volunteer appears to have a significant leak point between the “returnee” and “trainee” stages. Four respondents noted that there is no formal mechanism to invite or encourage returnees to join the camp volunteer network. Those who do join typically do so because they personally know an existing volunteer, an informal, network-dependent recruitment model that limits both diversity and reach.

“I wanted to join earlier, but I sent two inquiries and never got a reply, so I missed those two years” (R4, SLUG member, 2 years).

“It was an easy entrance because I knew a lot of the people in SLUG at that moment” (R1, SLUG member, 4+ years).

This finding adds nuance to the retention literature: while AFS Sweden’s camp community provides strong relational motivation for those within it, the lack of structured entry points means that the pipeline feeding this community is narrow and self-selecting.

3.5 Theme 4: Onboarding and training: inconsistent and informal

The training pathway from trainee to camp chief was described by all respondents as unclear and inconsistent. There is no standardised training programme; instead, learning

happens through observation and ad hoc guidance from more experienced volunteers.

“I became a workshop leader because someone asked me the week before the camp. There was no training; I just watched what the others did and tried to copy it” (R4, camp volunteer).

Other respondents described similar uncertainty when preparing workshops or taking on higher-responsibility camp roles:

“If you were to read it by yourself, it would be kind of hard to understand. The workshops are hard to understand and you do not really know what you want to get out of them” (R8, camp volunteer, 1.5 years).

“Leading workshops was not as easy as I thought. There is something specific that has to get through to the students. It was a bit harder than I thought” (R11, camp volunteer, 1 year).

“I did not feel like I would be able to do my first camp chief role without someone who had already done it before. It is pretty daunting; that is why it is very important to have at least two organisers” (R7, camp volunteer, 2 years).

From an SDT perspective, this informality undermines the competence need: volunteers are placed in roles without adequate preparation, leading to insecurity and, in some cases, reluctance to return. Research on volunteer socialisation by Haski-Leventhal & Bargal (2008) has shown that the transition from newcomer to effective contributor requires structured support during the early “accommodation” stage; without it, volunteers either withdraw or remain in peripheral roles. The autonomy need is also affected, as volunteers lack the information needed to make independent decisions during camp activities.

A related finding concerns the relationship between volunteers and the previous, Stockholm-based office. Seven respondents described the office as “distant” or “unreachable,” particularly for logistical support. Two SLUG members noted that email response times of several weeks were not uncommon, creating frustration and a sense of operating without organisational backing.

“It was a bit hard to know, as a camp chief, which responsibilities belonged to the office and which were ours. It was not clear” (R10, camp volunteer, 5 years).

“The roles were not clearly set when I joined. Because of that, we spent time writing a manual on what each role meant, what duties you had and how you would cooperate” (R3, board member, former SLUG member).

“We texted them a hundred times and never got an answer. We could not print

out the materials; we could not get the materials. So I bought them myself and sent the invoice, but the office did not answer me” (R4, SLUG member, 2 years).

“It was when we were changing the office from Stockholm to Denmark. It was a bit of panic. I learned that the camp after that was even worse: they could not get hold of the office at that time” (R7, camp volunteer, 2 years).

3.6 Theme 5: Communication fragmentation and digital chaos

The final theme concerns the fragmentation of communication channels and digital infrastructure. Respondents reported using a combination of personal email, WhatsApp groups, Google Drive folders (owned by individuals) and occasional Facebook Messenger threads. No single platform serves as the authoritative source of information.

“I’m in three different WhatsApp groups for the same camp. Nobody knows which one is the official one” (R7, camp volunteer).

The same fragmentation was visible in document storage and time-sensitive camp information:

“There are hundreds of drives with documents, nothing is updated and you cannot make comments” (R7, camp volunteer, 2 years).

“Knowing when the camps are and who is going to organise them is information that is pretty hard to find. It is generally done via private messages or via Instagram. Those of us who do not use Instagram miss the information because it just appears for a day and then disappears” (R7, camp volunteer, 2 years).

This fragmentation is both a symptom and a cause of the knowledge management challenges described in Theme 2. Information that should be organisational assets (planning documents, evaluation reports, contact lists) is instead scattered across personal accounts, accessible only to those who created them.

Importantly, the problem is not a lack of digital tools: AFS Sweden has access to Google Workspace and ONE AFS³ through its partnership with AFS International. Rather, it is a lack of agreed conventions for how tools are used. This distinction is critical for the recommendations in Chapter 5: the solution is not another new tool, but a governance framework for existing tools.

³All-in-one online database AFS International.

Added value of the field research

The added value of the field research lies in showing how the structural factors identified in the desk and comparative research are experienced in practice by AFS Sweden's own volunteers. The comparative summary in Section 2.3 already indicated that shared digital workspaces, planning committees, onboarding routines, evaluation practices and workload distribution differ across organisations. However, the interviews revealed what was not yet visible from that comparison: the emotional and practical consequences of these gaps in Sweden. Respondents showed that unclear roles do not only create organisational inefficiency, but also hesitation, dependency on a small group of experienced volunteers and a sense of being unsupported. The field research also uncovered specific mechanisms behind knowledge loss, such as documents being stored in personal drives, camp information circulating through temporary social media channels and new volunteers learning mainly through informal observation. In this way, the field research did not merely confirm the desk research; it explained why these structural weaknesses matter for motivation, continuity and long-term sustainability.

This completes the thematic analysis. The next chapter synthesises these findings into conclusions that answer the research questions and identify the root causes underlying the observed patterns.

Chapter 4

Conclusions

This chapter synthesises findings from the desk and field research to answer the research questions, moving from specific sub-questions to the central research question. Given that root causes, limitations and individual themes were already discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, this chapter focuses on synthesis and implications rather than repetition.

4.1 Answering the sub-questions

4.1.1 SQ1: What constitutes a sustainable volunteer structure for camp-based programmes and which models and practices are relevant in the context of AFS?

The desk research established that a sustainable volunteer structure rests on three interconnected dimensions (Kaur, Smith, Pazour & Schumacher, 2020):

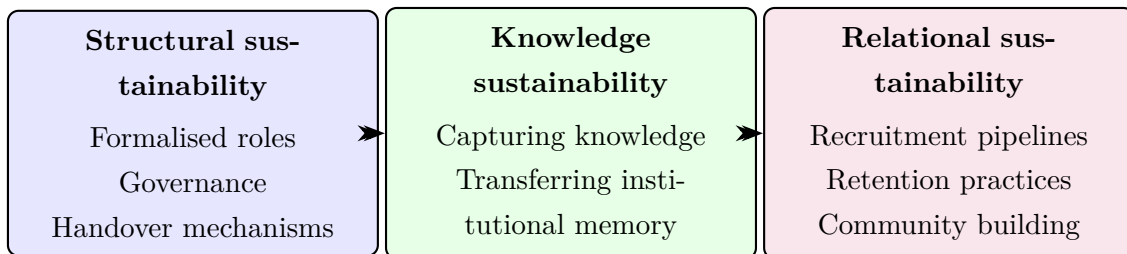


Figure 4.1: Three interconnected dimensions of a sustainable volunteer structure.

SDT provides the motivational foundation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), while the SECI model highlights the vulnerability of organisations relying exclusively on tacit knowledge transfer (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

The comparative analysis of Nordic AFS partners and YFU revealed concrete practices that operationalise these principles. Most relevant for AFS Sweden are practices already proven within the Nordic context: AFS Norway’s structured shared drive with multi-year camp archives (now transitioning to independent leadership by May 2026), AFS Denmark’s dedicated planning committee, daily volunteer evaluations and standardised camp openings and YFU’s regional coordinator model with centralised training curriculum.

Norway's trajectory is particularly instructive: operating under the same shared partner director as Sweden and Denmark, it built sufficient organisational capacity to achieve independent leadership, demonstrating that investment in volunteer infrastructure yields returns beyond the camp programme itself.

4.1.2 SQ2: What structural challenges and motivational factors shape the current camp volunteer experience in AFS Sweden?

The field research identified a pattern of interconnected structural challenges. The frequencies below reflect how often each challenge appeared directly or indirectly across the 13 interview transcripts. Direct references include explicit statements about unclear roles, missing handovers or absent onboarding. Indirect references include examples where respondents described the practical consequences of these gaps, such as relying on one experienced volunteer, searching through personal channels for information or entering a camp role without knowing what was expected. The figures should therefore be read as thematic coding frequencies rather than survey results:

Structural challenge	Manifestation	Respondents affected
Absence of formal role definitions	Responsibilities are assumed implicitly; workload concentrates among experienced volunteers	11/13 (85%)
Person-dependent knowledge management	Camp planning knowledge, contacts and logistics disappear when individuals step back; successors rebuild from scratch	11/13 (85%)
Informal, unstructured onboarding	New volunteers enter without clear expectations; competence development is limited and inconsistent	10/13 (77%)
Episodic community and no recruitment pipeline	Relatedness needs are met at camp but dissipate between events; recruitment relies on personal networks alone	10/13 (77%)

Table 4.1: Structural challenges identified in the field research, with frequency of direct or indirect citation across the interview transcripts.

On the motivational side, the findings reveal a paradox. The strongest retention factor: social connection and shared AFS identity is also the most episodic. In SDT terms:

relatedness is strong but time-limited, competence is undermined by inconsistent training and autonomy is constrained by information asymmetry. This combination sustains a committed but fragile core while failing to broaden the volunteer base.

4.1.3 SQ3: How does the cross-border organisational structure between Sweden and Denmark affect volunteer support, coordination and engagement?

The organisational challenges in AFS Sweden's volunteer network cannot be attributed straightforwardly to the cross-border structure. Until 2025, Swedish staff were still officially based in Stockholm, meaning the primary source of coordination difficulties was not geographical distance but the quality of communication within the Swedish operation itself.

Respondents described **a period of poor responsiveness and limited transparency with the previous staff**. The arrival of two new staff members has already made a substantial difference in the day-to-day functioning of the volunteer structure. Respondents pointed to faster response times, clearer contact persons for students and host families, monthly meetings with volunteers and stronger practical cooperation with the Danish office as signs that the organisational distance is being reduced in practice. These improvements show that the cross-border structure itself is not necessarily the problem; when communication is intentional and responsibilities are visible, the same structure can become more supportive. At the same time, some gaps remain: not all volunteers consistently know who works at the office or what their respective roles are, which can still limit volunteers' ability to direct queries appropriately and sustain a degree of operational uncertainty.

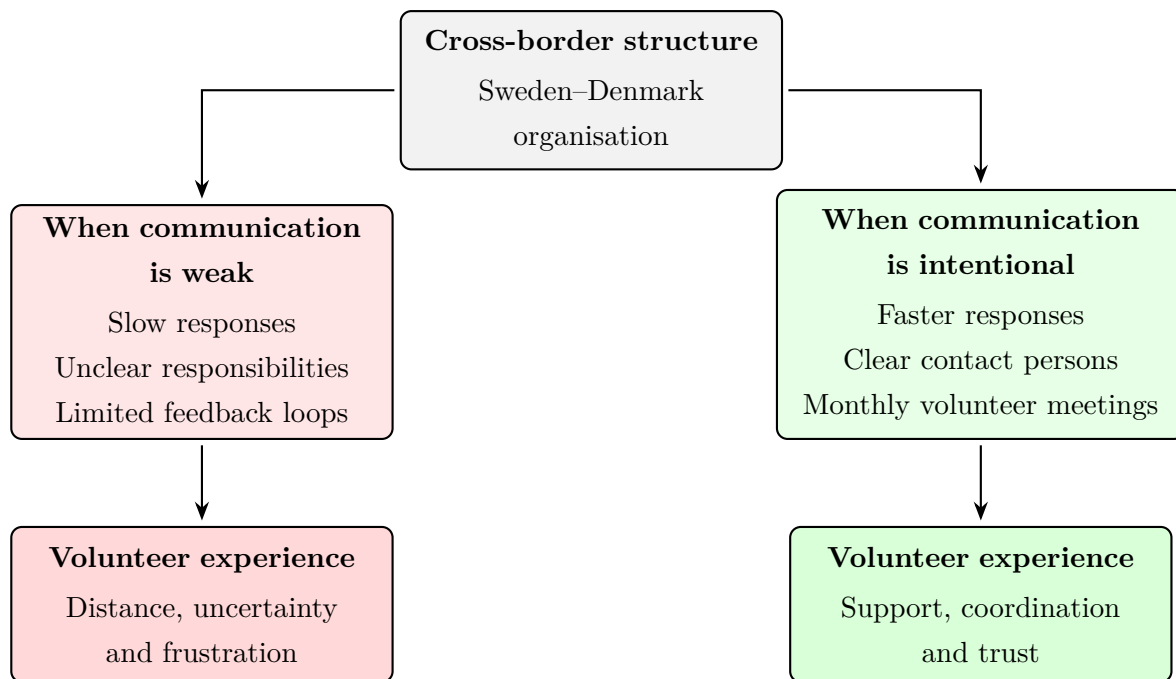


Figure 4.2: How communication quality shapes the impact of the cross-border structure on volunteer experience.

The strategic disconnection identified in the field research is similarly rooted in organisational culture rather than geography. Previously, there were no structured mechanisms for gathering volunteer feedback and no shared understanding of what was working well or what needed improvement. This was not experienced as a deliberate exclusion but rather as an absence of habit: feedback was not sought, so it was not given and institutional learning did not accumulate.

Despite these challenges, **the cross-border structure presents concrete opportunities** that remain underexploited:

- Danish volunteers have developed practices: dedicated planning committees, structured daily evaluations, standardised camp openings that AFS Sweden lacks and the shared organisational framework means these could be adopted with minimal adaptation.
- Norway's trajectory under the same shared management model demonstrates that the structure does not inherently prevent organisational strengthening.
- Additionally, the volunteer shortage that respondents identified as a persistent constraint could be partially addressed by leveraging the broader AFS network: recruiting through partner organisations where needed and organising joint training with SPOT would expand the volunteer pool while strengthening inter-organisational relationships.

The challenge for AFS Sweden is therefore not the cross-border structure itself, but the absence of deliberate investment in the communication practices and volunteer systems needed to function effectively within it.

4.1.4 SQ4: How can volunteers and the office co-create tools and practices that address the identified challenges and strengthen the volunteer structure?

The data converges on a clear principle: sustainable solutions cannot be designed *for* volunteers; they must be designed *with* them. This is justified on both practical grounds (volunteers hold the tacit operational knowledge that any tool must capture) and motivational grounds (participation fulfils the autonomy need SDT identifies as essential for sustained engagement).

Co-creation should focus on four priority areas:

Priority area	Rationale	Output
Role clarity	Co-developed role descriptions reflect operational reality, not idealised expectations	Role cards and handover checklists
Knowledge infrastructure	Volunteers determine what to preserve, in what format and where	Shared, maintained digital workspace
Onboarding design	Experienced and newer volunteers jointly design training that balances structure with valued flexibility	Tiered onboarding pathway
Communication rhythm	Regular touchpoints require agreement from both sides on frequency, format and purpose	Agreed office-volunteer communication protocol

Table 4.2: Priority areas for co-creation and their outputs.

The Camp Volunteer Toolkit (Chapter 6) operationalises these four areas through an iterative co-creation process with SLUG members and experienced camp volunteers.

4.2 Root cause analysis

The structural challenges identified across the sub-questions are not independent problems. As the thematic analysis in Chapter 3 showed, they are manifestations of three interconnected root causes:

- **RC1: Absence of formalised governance**
- **RC2: Person-dependent knowledge systems**
- **RC3: Structural distance in the cross-border organisation**

These three causes interact in a self-reinforcing cycle, shown in Figure 4.3. Breaking the cycle requires intervention on all three root causes simultaneously, which is the rationale for the integrated approach in Chapters 5 and 6.

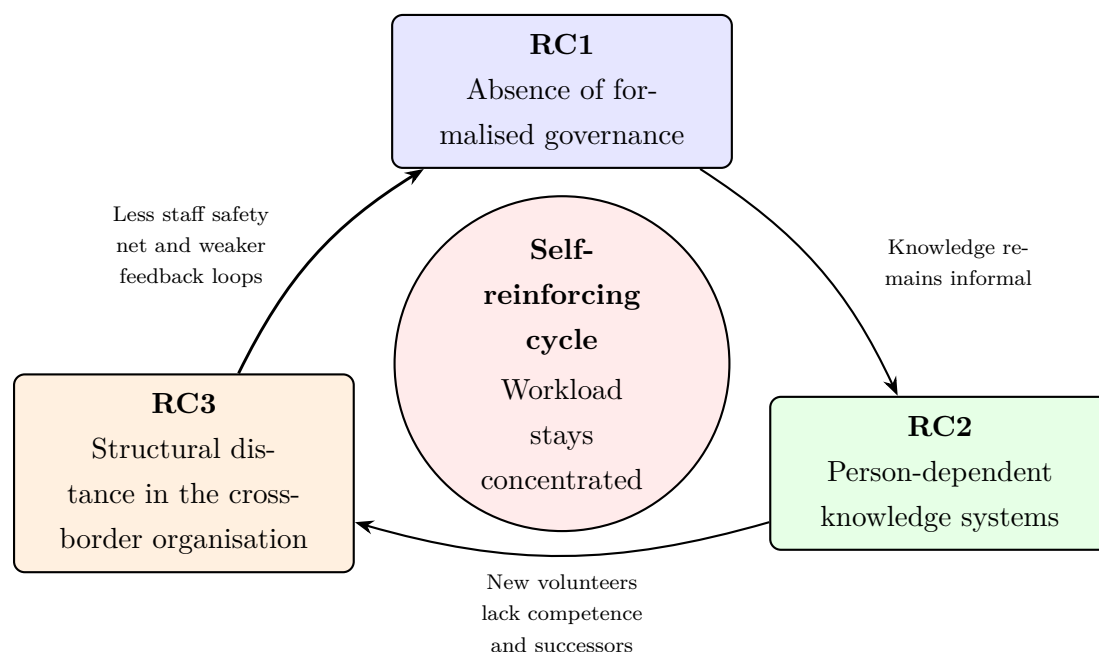


Figure 4.3: Self-reinforcing interaction between the three root causes.

4.3 Alternative interpretations and limitations

Four constraints must be acknowledged:

- *Survivorship bias*: the sample consists exclusively of currently or recently active volunteers. Those who left, potentially because of the very problems this study investigates, are not represented, meaning root cause severity may be underestimated. To address this structurally, the organisation should implement an annual exit interview or carefully designed exit survey for all departing volunteers, ensuring that motivations for leaving are captured systematically rather than lost.

- *Researcher positionality*: the researcher's embeddedness in the AFS network may have influenced questions asked and responses given, despite the mitigation measures described in Section 3.1.4.
- *Sample size and generalisability*: 13 interviews provide rich qualitative insight but limit statistical generalisability. Analytical generalisability to similar contexts is argued through comparative desk research but cannot be empirically verified within this study.
- *Comparative data constraints*: the Erasmus+ Exchange ($n = 15$) drew from a self-selected sample of camp coordinators, likely overrepresenting the most engaged volunteers. Comparative findings should be treated as indicative rather than definitive.

An alternative interpretation is that AFS Sweden's challenges simply reflect the normal informality of a small volunteer organisation. This is partly plausible: volunteer groups often operate informally and still function effectively (Lee & Brudney, 2012). However, the field evidence suggests that informality has moved beyond a cultural style and has become a structural risk.

The distinction is important:

- **Informality as a cultural asset** should be preserved: respondents valued warmth, friendship, flexibility and the feeling of belonging within the volunteer community.
- **Informality as an organisational strategy** is no longer sufficient: 85% of respondents identified governance gaps, 85% described recurring knowledge loss and multiple respondents independently noted a declining volunteer base in recent years.

The question is therefore not whether AFS Sweden should abandon informality. Rather, the question is how it can introduce enough structure to prevent continuing capacity erosion while protecting the relational culture that respondents consistently identified as their primary motivation.

4.4 Answering the research question

Central research question: *How can AFS Sweden develop a sustainable camp volunteer structure through co-creation between volunteers and the office, given its current cross-border organisational context?*

The evidence points to a systemic answer. AFS Sweden can develop a sustainable camp volunteer structure by simultaneously addressing governance, knowledge systems and cross-border distance through a co-creation process that involves both volunteers and staff in designing solutions.

Partial interventions will not break the reinforcing cycle: role descriptions without knowledge infrastructure will not prevent the “starting from scratch” pattern; digital tools without governance clarity will produce well-maintained chaos; improved communication without addressing underlying gaps will create regular touchpoints with little substantive content to exchange. Integration is not optional; it is demanded by the structure of the problem.

Critically, the solution must preserve what works. The informal, community-driven culture respondents identified as their primary motivation is not a problem to be solved but an asset to be protected. The comparative evidence suggests this balance is achievable: AFS Norway has introduced structured planning and shared knowledge systems while maintaining a volunteer culture described in similarly communal terms. The following chapter translates these conclusions into five actionable recommendations, ordered by implementation priority.

Chapter 5

Recommendations

The recommendations below are derived directly from the root cause analysis and sub-question findings presented in Chapter 4. They are ordered by implementation priority and grouped according to the root cause they primarily address, though most recommendations touch multiple root causes given their interconnected nature. Each recommendation is presented through the same structure: root cause addressed, evidence base, intervention type, resource requirement, feasibility, responsibility, sustainability horizon where applicable, primary risk, risk mitigation and a “How Might We” design question that informed the co-creation process described in Chapter 6.

5.1 Formalise volunteer roles and governance

Recommendation 5.1 at a glance	
Root cause addressed	RC1: Absence of formalised governance
Evidence base	SQ2 · Theme 1 · Theme 4: raised by 11/13 respondents
Intervention type	Co-created one-pager per role
Resource requirement	€0 budget · No new tools · one hour co-creation and review session
Feasibility	High
Responsibility	AFS Sweden office initiates and approves; Pool of Camp Coordinators and experienced camp volunteers co-create and review the role descriptions annually
Sustainability horizon	Year 1: pilot → Year 2+: embedded in annual camp opening
Primary risk	Over-formalisation alienating volunteers who value informality (R1, R4, R6, S4)
Risk mitigation	Descriptions framed as guidance; adaptive language built in; co-creation ensures ownership
HMW question	How might we clarify what is expected in each camp role while preserving the flexibility that volunteers value?

The field research identifies the absence of documented role definitions as the single most frequently cited structural challenge: 11 of 13 respondents raised it unprompted. Work-load concentration among a small group of experienced volunteers is not a motivation problem it is an information problem. Newer volunteers described hesitating to step up not out of unwillingness but because the scope of roles such as camp chief, workshop facilitator and trainee is nowhere codified and the authority each role carries is undefined. Without a shared reference point, responsibility defaults to whoever already knows, reproducing the same concentration cycle each year.

The recommendation: AFS Sweden should co-develop, with active volunteers, a concise set of role descriptions covering the core camp roles. The process should be co-creative by design: a single structured working session of one hour in which experienced volunteers draft and stress-test descriptions against real past camps. This ensures the documents reflect operational reality rather than idealised expectation.

Role description template: [Name of role]	
What	<i>A clear explanation of what this role, activity or service entails.</i>
Target group	<i>Who it is intended for, e.g. age group, users, students or volunteers.</i>
Point of contact	<i>The person or role responsible for coordination, questions or supervision.</i>
Frequency	<i>How often it takes place, e.g. daily, weekly, monthly or on demand.</i>
Tasks & tools	• Key tasks: <i>Main responsibilities and what the role holder is expected to do.</i> • Methods & guidance: <i>Frameworks, instructions or approaches used to carry out the tasks.</i> • Tools & materials: <i>Documents or supporting resources required.</i>

Table 5.1: Visual example of the proposed one-page role description template.

Risk management: The primary risk that formalisation alienates volunteers who value AFS Sweden’s informal culture, is mitigated through three deliberate design choices: explicitly non-prescriptive language (*“this is a guide, not a rulebook”*), co-creation as a safeguard against perceived external imposition and a one-page-per-role limit that ensures documents read as practical orientation rather than procedural mandate.



Figure 5.1: The three core camp volunteer roles to be formalised under Recommendation 5.1, each with a co-created one-page description covering responsibilities, time commitment and handover checklist.

5.2 Build a centralised, governed knowledge workspace

Recommendation 5.2 at a glance	
Root cause addressed	RC2: Person-dependent knowledge systems
Evidence base	SQ2 · SQ4 · Theme 2 · Theme 5: knowledge loss and fragmented digital infrastructure cited by 11/13 respondents
Intervention type	Centralised ONE AFS workspace with agreed folder structure, templates and learnings log
Resource requirement	€0 budget · Uses existing ONE AFS and Google Workspace infrastructure · requires ownership and maintenance time
Feasibility	Medium (no new tools required; success depends on governance and upkeep)
Responsibility	AFS Sweden office appoints a staff member to update the files if needed; Pool of Camp Coordinators and experienced volunteers co-create and review templates annually
Sustainability horizon	Year 1: pilot workspace for 2026 camps → Year 2+: embedded as the default archive and handover system
Primary risk	Workspace becomes another unused or outdated folder if ownership is unclear
Risk mitigation	Assign a knowledge steward; include annual review in the General Assembly or camp planning cycle; keep the structure simple and volunteer-tested
HMW question	How might we make camp knowledge easy to find, update and pass on without creating extra administrative burden?

The “starting from scratch” cycle described by nine respondents is not caused by a lack of digital tools; AFS Sweden has access to Google Workspace and ONE AFS through AFS International, but by the absence of agreed conventions for how those tools are used. Camp planning documents, contact lists, workshop materials and evaluation feedback are scattered across personal Google Drives, email inboxes and WhatsApp groups, accessible only to the individuals who created them. When those individuals leave, the information becomes effectively lost.

The recommendation: AFS Sweden should establish a structured resource workspace within its existing ONE AFS environment, with standardised folder architecture and templates for the most critical camp processes: planning, logistics, content design and handover. The workspace should include a learnings log where each camp team records what worked, what did not and what the next team should know, converting tacit experience into explicit, accessible knowledge. The Norwegian experience is instructive: their shared drive works because materials are organised logically and span multiple years, demonstrating that the system’s value compounds over time as more cycles contribute to the archive.

Risk management: The main systemic risk is the absence of clear ownership. Without explicit responsibility, initial enthusiasm may decline over time, causing the workspace to fragment and ultimately mirror the inefficiencies it was intended to resolve. To mitigate this risk, the workspace should be formally evaluated during the annual General Assembly and a designated engagement staff member should be appointed to maintain and update ONE AFS, ensuring continuity, accountability and sustained engagement.

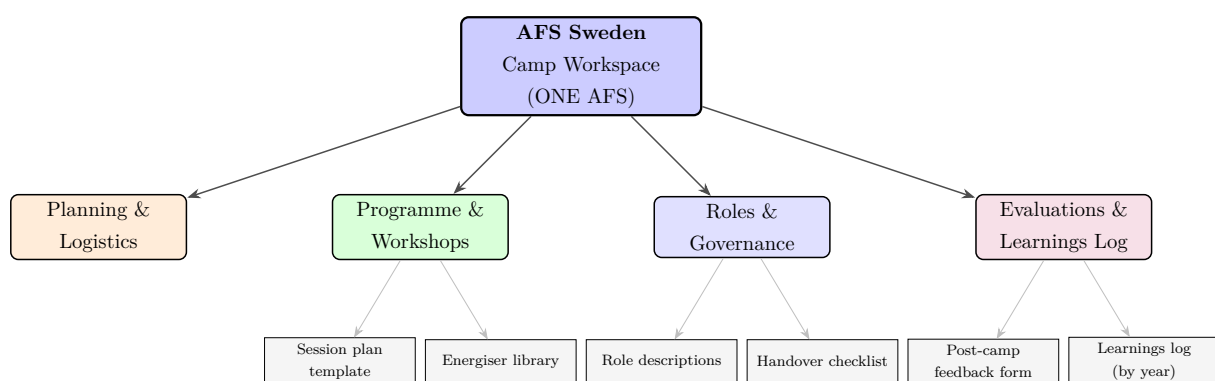


Figure 5.2: Proposed folder architecture for the centralised knowledge workspace within AFS Sweden’s ONE AFS environment (Recommendation 5.2).

5.3 Establish structured office–volunteer communication touchpoints

Recommendation 5.3 at a glance	
Root cause addressed	RC3: Cross-border organisational distance
Evidence base	SQ3 · Theme 4 · Theme 5: unpredictable communication cited across all cohorts
Intervention type	Fixed communication rhythm: regular volunteer brief, seasonal planning meeting and agreed response channels
Resource requirement	Moderate budget if Mailchimp is used to automate volunteer updates · time saving for staff once templates and contact lists are set up
Feasibility	Medium (low technical complexity, but dependent on consistent staff follow-up)
Responsibility	AFS Sweden office owns the communication rhythm; board + Pool of Camp Coordinators + NPOT provide volunteer-side input and agenda items
Sustainability horizon	Year 1: pilot communication rhythm → Year 2+: embedded in annual office–volunteer planning calendar
Primary risk	Commitments erode with office staff turnover in Copenhagen
Risk mitigation	Document the rhythm in the communication overview, assign a named office owner
HMW question	How might we create a communication rhythm between the office and volunteers that feels supportive rather than bureaucratic?

The cross-border structure between Sweden and Denmark is a given; it will not change in the foreseeable future. The question is therefore not how to reverse the merger but how to make the current structure work for volunteers. Field research shows that perceived distance is influenced more by the lack of regular, predictable communication than by physical geography. Volunteers described not knowing when or how to reach the office, experiencing long response times and feeling uncertain about whether their input reaches decision-makers.

The recommendation: AFS Sweden should establish a fixed communication rhythm: a monthly brief newsletter or update from the office to all camp volunteers, a quarterly

video call between the Pool of Camp Coordinators and the relevant office staff member and an annual planning meeting at the start of the camp season where the office, coordinators and camp teams align on the calendar, logistics responsibilities and support needs. Additionally, a shared communication calendar should make visible who is responsible for what and when key deadlines fall. Mailchimp could be used to automate the regular volunteer brief: this would add a small software cost, but reduce staff time through reusable templates, scheduled updates and segmented mailing lists.

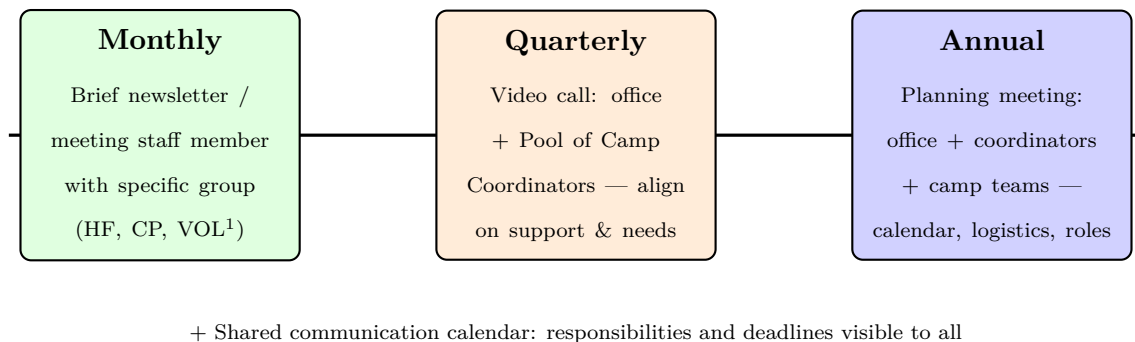


Figure 5.3: Proposed communication rhythm under Recommendation 5.3, establishing predictable touchpoints between the Copenhagen office and the Swedish volunteer network at monthly, quarterly and annual intervals.

Risk management: The primary risk is relationship erosion resulting from staff turnover in Copenhagen. Connections established with a single contact person do not automatically carry over to their successor and should therefore be formally documented in a structured handover. Trust is built through repeated, reliable interactions over time, not through a one-off, well-intentioned initiative.

¹HF = host family; CP = contact person; VOL = volunteer.

5.4 Design a visible onboarding and development pathway

Recommendation 5.4 at a glance	
Root cause addressed	RC1 + RC2: Governance absence and person-dependent knowledge
Evidence base	SQ2 · SQ3 · Theme 3 · Theme 4: invisible pathway limits recruitment pipeline and competence development
Intervention type	Visual development pathway (returnee → camp chief) with linked resources in knowledge workspace
Resource requirement	€0 budget · Builds directly on Recs. 5.1 and 5.2
Feasibility	High (incremental build; simple visual for 2026, resources added progressively)
Responsibility	NPOT advises on training content; Pool of Camp Coordinators links the pathway to camp roles; AFS office includes it in returnee and volunteer communication
Sustainability horizon	Year 1: simple visual pathway → Year 2+: linked to onboarding, role templates and training resources
Primary risk	Pathway feels prescriptive in a culture that values organic, learn-by-doing progression
Risk mitigation	Frame as roadmap not requirement; volunteers progress at own pace and may skip stages
HMW question	How might we make the path from returnee to camp leader visible and inviting without turning volunteering into a checklist?

The current pathway from returnee to camp chief is invisible. No document describes it, no person consistently communicates it and the criteria for progression are tacit, residing in the judgement of experienced volunteers who may or may not be available to the next generation. This invisibility has two consequences: potential volunteers do not know the pathway exists, limiting the recruitment pipeline (Theme 3) and those who do enter it lack the structured preparation needed to develop competence and confidence, undermining the autonomy and competence needs that SDT identifies as central to sustained motivation (Theme 4).

The recommendation: AFS Sweden should design a visual development pathway that

maps the journey from returnee to camp chief, with clear stages (returnee → trainee → workshop facilitator → camp chief), indicative learning objectives at each stage and links to the relevant resources in the knowledge workspace (Recommendation 5.2). The pathway should be co-created with volunteers who have walked it themselves, ensuring it reflects actual experience rather than an idealised version. It should be communicated proactively to returnees as part of AFS Sweden’s post-exchange engagement, addressing the pipeline gap where the transition from returnee to active volunteer currently depends entirely on personal networks.

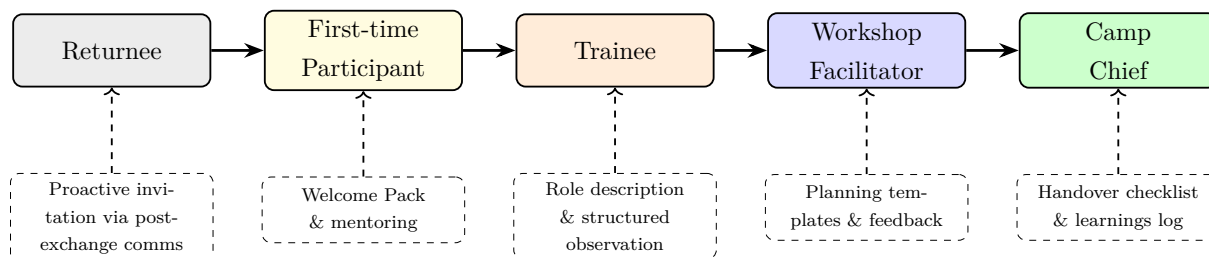


Figure 5.4: Proposed formalised volunteer development pathway with toolkit-supported resources at each stage (dashed arrows). Volunteers progress at their own pace; the pathway is a roadmap, not a requirement.

Risk management: Several experienced respondents described their own development as “learning by doing” and expressed scepticism about formalised training. This risk is real: a pathway that reads as a mandatory checklist could deter the self-directed volunteers AFS Sweden most wants to retain. Mitigation lies in framing and design. The pathway must communicate optionality; volunteers can skip stages, progress at their own pace and contribute meaningfully at any level. It makes options visible; it does not mandate a route. The co-creation process is itself a mitigation mechanism: volunteers who helped design the pathway are far less likely to experience it as an external imposition.

5.5 Organise an annual cross-Nordic volunteer gathering

Recommendation 5.5 at a glance	
Root cause addressed	RC1 + RC3: Governance absence and organisational distance
Evidence base	SQ3 · SQ4 · Theme 3 · Erasmus+ inter-Nordic Exchange: mutual learning appetite confirmed across all three countries
Intervention type	Annual gathering (physical or online) for cross-Nordic knowledge exchange and community building
Resource requirement	Online pilot: near-zero budget · Physical gathering: Erasmus+ or equivalent EU funding
Feasibility	Medium (online pilot: High · Physical format: contingent on funding)
Responsibility	AFS Sweden office proposes the pilot to AFS Norway and AFS Denmark; Nordic staff confirm capacity and one volunteer representative per country co-designs the programme
Sustainability horizon	Year 1: online pilot → Year 2+: full gathering (physical if funded, online if not)
Primary risk	Low attendance if perceived as additional obligation rather than valuable experience
Risk mitigation	Co-designed with Nordic counterparts; timed outside camp season; content practical not theoretical
HMW question	How might we turn the Nordic AFS network from a shared administrative structure into a shared learning community?

The Erasmus+ inter-Nordic camp coordinator Exchange revealed not only shared challenges across Sweden, Norway and Denmark, but also a strong and unmet appetite for cross-country learning. Norwegian volunteers expressed interest in how other countries keep camp content engaging; Danish respondents wanted to understand how other organisations structure their volunteer networks; Swedish respondents sought new activities and methods for workshops. This mutual curiosity is currently underexploited — beyond the Erasmus+ project itself, there is no regular mechanism for cross-Nordic exchange among camp volunteers.

The recommendation: AFS Sweden should establish an annual gathering, physical

or online, that brings together camp volunteers from across the Nordic AFS network for practical knowledge exchange, joint training and community building. This directly addresses the episodic nature of social connection identified in Theme 3 by creating a structured touchpoint outside the camp season, while simultaneously leveraging the cross-border structure as an asset rather than experiencing it only as a constraint. For AFS Sweden specifically, the gathering creates an opportunity to learn from tested practices in Norway and Denmark, such as Norway's multi-year shared drive system or Denmark's standardised camp opening without needing to develop everything independently.

Risk management: The main risk is low attendance if the gathering is perceived as an extra obligation rather than a useful volunteer experience. This risk can be reduced through four design choices:

Design choice	How it reduces the risk
Co-design with volunteers	Ensures the programme reflects actual camp needs instead of office assumptions.
Schedule outside camp season	Avoids adding pressure during peak volunteer workload.
Keep content practical	Focuses on concrete methods, tools and examples rather than abstract presentations.
Start with an online pilot	Lowers the participation threshold and tests demand before investing in a physical gathering.

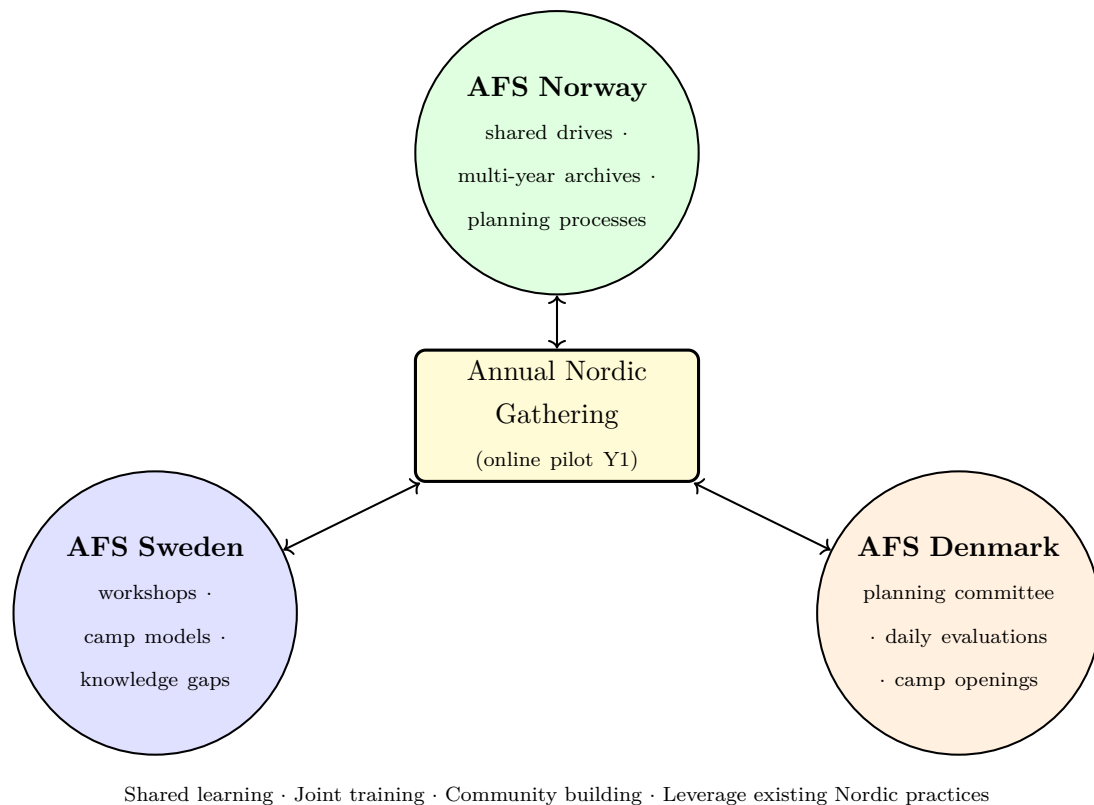


Figure 5.5: Structure of the proposed annual cross-Nordic volunteer gathering (Recommendation 5.5), connecting AFS Sweden, Norway and Denmark for practical knowledge exchange.

Implementation priority and product link

Priority	Recommendation	Timing	Reason
Immediate foundation	5.1 Role governance; 5.3 Communication rhythm	May–June 2026	Low resource requirement and needed before other changes can function.
Core infrastructure	5.2 Knowledge workspace	May–June 2026	Gives role descriptions and communication commitments a shared place to live.
Development layer	5.4 Onboarding pathway	By August 2026	Builds on the role clarity and workspace created in 5.1 and 5.2.
Network expansion	5.5 Cross-Nordic gathering	Online pilot first; physical later if feasible	Strategically valuable but requires more coordination and possible external funding.

References

Supporting evidence and product access

The interview recordings and transcripts can be accessed through the following OneDrive folder: https://studentarteveldehsbe-my.sharepoint.com/:f/g/personal/jorralme_student_arteveldehs_be/IgDaYEEYa5ag6RZM6m2fHyvSUAWlcQsn-yRe6FTs0A_wabfA?e=kkt5KJ.

The final business product, including shareable screenshots and PDF exports of the Camp Volunteer Toolkit, can be accessed through the following OneDrive folder: https://studentarteveldehsbe-my.sharepoint.com/:f/g/personal/jorralme_student_arteveldehs_be/IgBu588gfF2tT6ehz_mkHA_MAAVJRKwdLuYOWyf3G8Gc4GA?e=uZdHgo. The operational toolkit itself is built in ONE AFS, a closed platform containing sensitive organisational and volunteer data; therefore, the OneDrive folder contains the assessable version of the product evidence.

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