An introduction to volunteering in the UK



This information sheet is one of three translated resources designed to help you understand and make choices about volunteering in the UK.

What is volunteering?

There are big differences in how people, organisations and governments think about and practice volunteering across the world.

In the UK, if you choose to do something unpaid, that aims to make a positive difference to an individual, a community, or the world we live in, this is considered volunteering.

Can I volunteer?

Yes! Anyone can volunteer. A large percentage of people living in the UK volunteer to support communities and projects at some point in their lives.

- You can volunteer if you are seeking asylum
- You can volunteer if you have refugee status
- You can volunteer if you are claiming benefits

Why would I volunteer?

You might want to volunteer to be part of a team that’s making a difference in your community. Plus, if you get involved in a good volunteering opportunity, you can also make friends, connect with local areas and cultures, and build skills and experience. You may also find volunteering helps improve your quality of life,

wellbeing health and ability to secure work. See our information sheet ‘planning to volunteer in the UK’ for more information.

What is not considered volunteering in the UK?

- If you are working in a job that would usually be paid, but doing it for free or for other valuable benefits
- If you are being forced to work without a wage
- If you are doing something to help a close family member or a business
- If you are doing unpaid internships or work experience placements.

Where can I volunteer?

There are many volunteering opportunities available in non-government organisations (NGOs), groups and institutions. This includes:

- Opportunities to volunteer in arts and culture, sports, health and social care, education, youth and community development, environment, nature and animal organisations, emergency services, policing and armed forces.

- Opportunities to volunteer alongside particular groups, for example alongside older people or with people with a migration background.
- Opportunities to volunteer on a particular issue, for example, poverty, housing, a health condition or digital exclusion.
- Opportunities to volunteer skills, for example: design, driving, accounting, IT, translating, health or teaching. You might also prefer to get involved in a less formal way, perhaps by coming together with neighbours or other people who care about issues or needs in the community.

The opportunities available to you can vary depending on factors including where you live. The recent emergence of remote and online volunteering may help open a wider range of opportunities to you.

Formal volunteering

Formal volunteering opportunities involve volunteers being trained and supported to do specific tasks in a particular way, to help an organisation achieve a goal.

In a formal role, you will be managed by a volunteer manager, and may volunteer alongside a mixed team of paid colleagues and other volunteers. What you can and can’t do, and how the project is managed will be affected by an organisation’s

obligations, policies, and any commitments they have made to funders, project partners and communities. As a result, you will need to sign a volunteering agreement or code of conduct if you want to get involved. This is not a contract.

Organisations usually advertise these opportunities and invite you to apply, often on an application form or by recorded video. After application, you may be invited to an interview and will be asked to consent to ‘background checks’ (see our information sheet on vetting and checks).

If you are offered the role you can expect a comprehensive induction explaining how everything works, and expect money to be available to cover travel, refreshments and any equipment needed. There may also be resources available to ensure you can take part; for example, the organisation may be able to cover childcare costs or data costs. You can expect ongoing support and training and the ability to use volunteer managers as a referee for future employment and other purposes.

Organisations and authorities have many different reasons for creating formal volunteering opportunities. The reasons an opportunity is created can impact the experience of volunteering greatly. For example, if you volunteer in a project created to extend what an organisation can do, it will feel different to a project that has been designed primarily for the benefit of the volunteers taking part.

Informal volunteering

When people act with friends, neighbours or faith and community groups to support each other and address issues this is often seen as ‘informal volunteering’.

People who volunteer in their own communities or in less formal ways, are less likely to identify themselves as a volunteer and more likely to use a phrase they feel comfortable with, or feel describes more practically what they do such as ‘take part in the community’, ‘help out’, ‘do mutual aid’, or ‘act in solidarity’.

Informal volunteering usually comes from people working together using resources from within their community to address shared issues

Historically, officials and funders work separately from informal volunteers, except in times of crisis like through Covid. Where informal volunteers are seen to be doing a good thing, they are often encouraged to take steps to become an official organisation. For some groups making this change really works, but for others this will take too much time and energy, and it may mean compromising the roots, culture and values of their project.

While people involved in informal volunteering make significant contributions to our communities, informal volunteers often don’t gain the same advantages as volunteers involved in formal volunteering, or the same support in terms of training and development, references, expenses, awards and more.

Sharing my lived experience

Sharing your knowledge as a person with a particular lived experience can be done as a volunteer or as a paid consultant.

For example, if you have experience of using public transport as a person that has come to the UK, you will have a lot of knowledge that could help transport planners to do better. You may be able to identify particular issues, challenges or opportunities other people can’t, because of who you are and the experiences you have had.

You might hear terms like ‘participation’, ‘co-production’, ‘having a voice’ or ‘having influence’ to describe this activity. People in this situation are described sometimes as ‘Experts by Experience’.

This is quite different to most other volunteering as it involves offering expertise gained by your experience to influence and guide what services do, and why and how they do it. See our factsheet ‘what is participation’ for more information.

A brief history of volunteering in the UK

This section is intended to help people understand how volunteering has evolved. It may be of interest to you in terms of understanding how people think and feel about volunteering, and to make sense of some of the stereotypes and criticisms of

volunteering. If you want to get straight to information on how to get involved in volunteering, please see our other information sheets ‘planning to volunteer’, and ‘an introduction to vetting and checks’, which are much more practical.

Historically, like in other countries, people in the UK have come together to help meet needs that the government and local authorities don’t meet, and to add something extra to their communities and environment.

Whilst a lot of this volunteering has complimented the work of authorities, there is also a long history of ordinary people organising with others to campaign for change or creating independent ways to solve problems.

Today, it’s common for councils and the government to rely on volunteers to deliver important activities and services, and to make large events possible like the Olympics.

It is also increasingly common for volunteering to be prescribed by doctors and support workers, as a way for people to improve employment potential, social connection and health and wellbeing.

In the past many organisations have created volunteering opportunities that work best for people with free time, free choice, and resources. This has made it harder for people with fewer resources or more pressures on their time, to contribute and benefit through volunteering. Now, with the input and leadership of people from a diversity of backgrounds, many

volunteer organisations are creating volunteer opportunities that are safer, more accessible and more attractive to join.

In the coming years in the UK, it is likely that volunteers will be called upon more and more to help with essential services and to meet emerging needs in our communities. This will lead to a lot of variety in the types of volunteering people can get involved in and benefit from.

For people claiming asylum who can't work, and for people working to build a life in the UK, these emerging volunteering opportunities may be a good way to understand and be more actively part of local communities, to make good use of time, and to meet a variety or personal needs and ambitions.

This information sheet was written by Migration Yorkshire in December 2022. If you have any questions, please get in touch and we'll do our best to help you:
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