

What is Volunteering?

This factsheet explains what volunteers are, what they do and how it differs from employment.

Volunteer – A definition

Volunteering is when someone spends unpaid time doing something to benefit others.

Helping your close friends or relatives isn't volunteering. But doing something to benefit the environment (and through that, other people) is.

Volunteering can be formal and organised by organisations, or informal within communities. It should always be a free choice made by the person giving up their time. NCVO.org.uk

There is no legal definition for a 'volunteer' and volunteering arrangements can vary greatly from the very informal to a highly formal structure.

Informal Volunteering is where someone gives unpaid help to benefit others in their community. Informal volunteering is often less likely to be recognised as 'volunteering' by most people.

Formal volunteering is where people give unpaid help through a group, club, society, local or public sector organisation.

Examples can include:

- keeping in touch with someone who has difficulty getting out and about (befriending)
- helping with household tasks
- fundraising
- being a trustee
- driving or transporting people or things
- monitoring or conserving wildlife and the landscape
- campaigning
- providing first aid
- administrative support
- giving information or advice
- retail customer service
- supporting or running events
- delivering a workshop
- being a school governor or member of a parent and teacher association
- serving as a parish councillor or magistrate
- helping in the NHS/police/coastguard
- campaigning and lobbying for MPs

Who volunteers are



Anyone from any age and background can be a volunteer. They can be studying, working, or retired. An employee may also volunteer through their company (corporate volunteering), whilst they are looking for work or as a refugee.

People have many different reasons for wanting to volunteer including:

- gain experience and skills for work
- meet other people or to get out of the house
- support their mental or physical health
- contribute to their local community
- change something for the better
- support a cause that's meaningful to them
- use their skills or experience to help others
- do something completely different or new

Volunteering is not employment

Volunteers aren't employees and aren't covered by employment law. Some volunteering can be very similar to paid work, so it is important to be clear about the differences between paid staff and volunteers.

- volunteering is a choice where a person gives their time freely
- volunteers are not a replacement for paid staff
- volunteers should be treated with the same fairness and respect as staff

How to check you aren't treating your volunteers like employees

Make it clear you will:

- avoid language that suggests employment (e.g. volunteer agreement vs contract)
- have a separate process for recruiting and supporting volunteers
- use the phrase, 'what you expect' from volunteers rather than 'must' or 'have to' when agreeing tasks
- avoid anything that could look like a payment for services
- avoid asking volunteers to book holiday or 'apply' for time off in advance
- only pay agreed out-of-pocket expenses

More legal guidance for volunteers can be found at www.gov.uk

Voscur is a council for voluntary service and a development agency for the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector in Bristol.

We deliver **training** on different aspects of running a VCSE organisation. Follow this link to our VCSE Academy to look for upcoming courses: <https://www.vcseacademy.org/courses/> We can also offer bespoke training for your organisation, so do get in touch to discuss your training needs.



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