

# Definitions of Volunteering

## Summary

Generally, volunteering is described as an unpaid activity where someone gives their time to help an organisation or an individual who they are not related to.

The UK does not actually have one common national definition of volunteering, although you can find definitions set out in government legislation and reports, as well in research on volunteering.

This Information Sheet contains a selection of recently quoted definitions which may be useful to anyone seeking clarification or wishing to define volunteering in a policy, funding bid or other piece of work.

**“The Compact Code of Good Practice on Volunteering”** published in 2005 contains a short definition of volunteering within a longer context-setting description of volunteering. It states that volunteering is “...an activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than (or in addition to) close relatives”.

The Compact Code also demonstrates the scope of volunteering by listing different types of activities:

## **2. Understanding Volunteering**

**2.1** Volunteering is an important expression of citizenship and fundamental to democracy. It is the commitment of time and energy for the benefit of society and the community, and can take many forms. It is freely undertaken and not for financial gain. The principle of non-payment of volunteers is central to this Code and to the wider sector and society’s understanding of volunteering.

**2.2** We understand the term volunteering to include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation and campaigning. For the purpose of this Code, volunteering is defined as an activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than (or in addition to) close relatives.

**2.3** People volunteer for many different reasons. They may choose to volunteer to develop skills or gain experience, to socialise or to give something back to society. They may also volunteer because they feel a moral duty or compelling reasons to take part in voluntary action or support a particular cause. The key element is that it is freely undertaken.”

Read the full code at:

<http://www.thecompact.org.uk/information/100023/publications/>

### **Other short definitions**

**“The National Survey of Volunteering 1997”** and **“Helping Out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving”** published in 2007 define volunteering as

"any activity which involves spending time, unpaid, doing something which aims to benefit someone (individuals or groups) other than or in addition to close relatives, or to benefit the environment" (pages 13-14).

**The Job Seeker’s Allowance Regulations 1996** say that

“"voluntary work" means work for an organisation the activities of which are carried on otherwise than for profit, or work other than for a member of the claimant's family”.

Statutory Instrument 1996 No. 207, regulation 4.

The Criminal Records Bureau uses the following definition from **The Police Act 1997 (Criminal Records) Regulations 2002** of a volunteer as

"a person engaged in an activity which involves spending time, unpaid (except for travel and other approved out-of-pocket expenses), doing something which aims to benefit some third party other than or in addition to a close relative".

Statutory Instrument 2002 No. 233, regulation 2.

### **A longer definition**

**The United Nations** used a long and detailed definition in the **International Year of Volunteers** in 2001 (which was quoted in the Russell Commission consultation document in 2004).

Viewpoint – The UN Definition Of Volunteering

“There are three key defining characteristics of volunteering.

First the activity should not be undertaken primarily for financial reward, although the reimbursement of expenses and some token payment may be allowed.

Second, the activity should be undertaken voluntarily, according to an individual’s own free-will, although there are grey areas here too, such as school community service schemes which encourage, and sometimes require, students to get involved in voluntary work and Food for Work programmes, where there is an explicit exchange between community involvement and food assistance.

Third, the activity should be of benefit to someone other than the volunteer, or to society at large, although it is recognised that volunteering brings significant benefit to the volunteer as well.

Within this broad conceptual framework it is possible to identify at least four different types of volunteer activity: mutual aid or self-help; philanthropy or

service to others; participation or civic engagement; and advocacy or campaigning. Each of these types occurs in all parts of the world.”  
United Nations Volunteers Report, prepared for the UN General Assembly Special Session on Social Development, Geneva, February 2001

### **Categorising voluntary activities**

“**The 2005 Home Office Citizenship Survey**” looks at both informal and formal volunteering.

“**Informal volunteering** is defined as giving unpaid help as an individual to someone who is not a relative.”

“**Formal volunteering** is defined as unpaid help given as part of groups, clubs or organisations to benefit others or the environment.”

These definitions, together with one for civic participation, are given on pages 4 & 6 of the “2005 Citizenship Survey: active communities topic report” which is available at:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/2005citizenshipsurveyactive>

In a **Voluntary Action Journal** article published in 2001, Justin Davis Smith wrote about defining volunteering and suggested a way of categorising activities according to their outcome:

“It is possible to identify at least four different types of volunteer activity, categorised according to their final outcome or final purpose: mutual aid or self-help; philanthropy or service to others; participation; and advocacy or campaigning.”

Voluntary Action, Volume 3 Number 1, Winter 2000, Volunteering and social development, [www.ivr.org.uk](http://www.ivr.org.uk)

### **Further information**

#### **Volunteering England Information Sheets**

“**National Statistics**”

“**Is it volunteering?**”

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/information>

#### **Making Sense of Volunteering: A literature review**

Published by Volunteering England on behalf of the Commission on the Future of Volunteering, 2007

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/publications>

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## **Volunteering England Information Sheet**

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**We have made every effort to ensure that this Information Sheet was correct at the time of publication. It is intended as a summary of relevant issues and suggests further sources of information. Legal advice should be sought where appropriate.**

For more information on managing volunteers, please visit  
The Good Practice Bank at [www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice)

All of Volunteering England's Information Sheets are available at:  
[www.volunteering.org.uk/information](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/information)

Or please contact Volunteering England Information Service  
Email: [Information@volunteeringengland.org](mailto:Information@volunteeringengland.org)  
Freephone Information Line: 0800 028 3304 (M-F 10.30-12.30 & 14.00-16.00)

Volunteering England  
Regent's Wharf  
8 All Saints Street  
London N1 9RL