

Finding out about volunteering

There is a huge range of volunteering opportunities available. Volunteers do all sorts of things from befriending someone who is isolated, to teaching a dance class, to helping out a charity with office work. And all sorts of people volunteer – the National Survey of Volunteering found that 22 million people, of all ages and ethnic and social backgrounds, volunteer across England every year. Some people volunteer full-time, while others volunteer for a few hours a week or even just for a day on a one-off project. Some organisations are looking for volunteers with certain skills, but most give full training and are just looking for someone with enthusiasm. Whatever your skills are, whatever you enjoy doing, whatever spare time you have, there will be a voluntary opportunity to suit you.

How do I find out which organisations are looking for volunteers?

If you are looking to volunteer locally in your spare time, the best thing to do is to visit your local Volunteer Bureau. Volunteer Bureaux work with local organisations to help them find volunteers. When an organisation needs a volunteer, it will register a vacancy with its local bureau, which will put it on its database. When you visit the bureau, the staff there will talk to you about what you want to do, how much time you have, and so on, and will then help you to look through the database and identify opportunities that suit you. They can answer any questions you have on volunteering, support you when you contact organisations, and help you to decide which opportunities are right for you. You can find out where your nearest bureau is by ringing Volunteering England on 0845 305 6779.

All Volunteer Bureaux upload their opportunities on to an online database called Do-It so you can also search for vacancies online. The Do-It site also has lots of articles and information on volunteering. It is quite a large database so at busy times it may be very slow or not work, but if this happens it is worth trying again later. The website address is <http://www.do-it.org.uk>

Organisations may also advertise locally, so it is worth looking at notice boards in community centres, libraries, doctor's surgeries etc. They may also place adverts in the local press. National charities sometimes advertise in the national press as well, The Society section of the *Guardian* on Wednesdays often has a page of volunteering opportunities.

Volunteering further afield

The information service at Volunteering England also produces factsheets on residential volunteering in the UK and volunteering abroad. You can obtain these by downloading them from our website:

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk>, phoning us on 0800 028 3304 (freephone/textphone), or e-mailing us at information@volunteeringengland.org

How do I know which opportunity is right for me?

Before you start looking for volunteer opportunities, think hard about what you want to get out of volunteering. Do you want to meet people, learn certain skills, help a certain group, get a reference? You will also have some practical considerations: maybe you can volunteer only at certain times, need a building that is accessible, or would prefer to volunteer near your house. Whatever your needs are, do not be afraid to discuss them with the organisation. There are more volunteer opportunities than there are volunteers, so it is worth searching around to find something that is suitable. Any good organisation will not mind you asking them about training, supervision, accessibility, support and so on before you start. If an organisation is awkward about answering your questions, then you may well decide that it would not be a good place to volunteer anyway.

What will happen when I contact an organisation about volunteering for them?

Organisations working with volunteers vary enormously and they all have slightly different ways of taking on volunteers. However, there are some things that will usually be the same. When you contact the organisation, you will need to speak to the volunteer co-ordinator or volunteer manager. They will be able to answer any questions that you might have and will tell you what to do next. You may have to fill out an application form or go for an interview. This is not like applying for a job. The organisation will just want to find out whether you have the basic skills they need and whether they can offer you the kind of opportunity that you want. At this stage you will still be deciding whether you like the organisation and want to offer your time to it. The application process is generally more about you choosing the organisation than it is about the organisation choosing you. If you feel that it is too formal, not approachable, not organised enough or whatever else at this stage, then it may not be the right organisation for you.

What should I expect as a volunteer?

Again, organisations vary a lot, but there are some basic things that you should expect as a volunteer.

- You should have an induction where you are told about the organisation and its policies are explained to you – this would generally cover things like health and safety, what to do if you have a problem, and an introduction to other staff and volunteers.
- You should be told who your supervisor is and how to contact them. It is important that you have a named supervisor who you can go to with any problems or queries.
- You should receive adequate training to be able to carry out your role. The exact nature of the training you receive will depend on the role, but you will need at least basic training about the work that you will be doing.
- You should receive ongoing support and supervision, as even if you have been with an organisation for a long time, it should still be talking to you regularly about whether you are happy and if there is anything more it can do to make your role easier or more interesting.

Will volunteering cost me anything?

Volunteering England believes that everybody should be able to volunteer and that volunteers should not be expected to offer money as well as time. Most organisations reimburse volunteers' expenses, so if you are thinking of working with one that doesn't, then it is worth asking why. If it does not have a good reason, this can suggest that it does not take volunteer involvement in its organisation very seriously. Under rules laid down by the Inland Revenue and the DSS, organisations are allowed to reimburse you for anything 'reasonable' you have had to pay for that you would not have had to purchase if you were not volunteering. This can include travel, meals purchased while volunteering, special clothing and care of dependants. Most organisations will have an expenses budget, so you will need to check how much they can pay and what their policy is. For instance, many will set a limit on how much they can reimburse for lunch, or may ask you to travel in the cheapest way that you can.