

An Introduction to the Resource Guides

NB This should be a precursor to the guides

This is the introduction to the ‘Volunteer Involvement’ Resource Guides (2022) which are a set of 6 Guides based on [Investing in Volunteers](#), the UK quality standard for involving volunteers.

The aim of the Guides is to provide organisations that want to involve volunteers with best practice information that will give the volunteer the best experience, while maximising their benefit to the organisation. Investing in Volunteers has 6 Quality Areas and 29 practices. Each guide will explore the Quality Area and accompanying practices to introduce you to the guidance that you will need:

[Resource Guide 1: Vision for volunteering](#)

[Resource Guide 2: Planning for volunteers](#)

[Resource Guide 3: Volunteer inclusion](#)

[Resource Guide 4: Recruiting and welcoming volunteers](#)

[Resource Guide 5: Supporting volunteers](#)

[Resource Guide 6: Valuing and developing volunteers](#)

The Guides are written for the person who has the responsibility for volunteers, regardless of their job/role title and the size of the organisation. It is recognised that volunteer involvement occurs in small volunteer-led organisations right through to large organisations that have lots of staff. How volunteers are engaged will differ considerably across all of these organisations. Some will have people who are paid to “manage” volunteers, some people will have the responsibility for volunteers added on to their existing role and in some cases, it will be volunteers, even members of management committees that look after other volunteers. Best practice in all these situations will look very different but regardless of the role, size or sector, how volunteers are involved should ensure that volunteers:

- ✓ **have a positive and enjoyable experience;**
- ✓ **are involved in a safe environment where their physical and emotional well-being are looked after;**
- ✓ **are aware of systems and processes in place to make volunteering effective;**
- ✓ **feel valued and respected for what they do.**

Therefore, as you read the accompanying Resource Guides, we ask you to contextualise the information to your setting and decide what degree of formality and flexibility is necessary to ensure the above 4 principles are in place.

This introduction provides the foundation upon which effective volunteer involvement is based. Please consider the following before going through and reading the 6 Resource Guides.

A. [Definition and nature of volunteering](#)

A.1 [What is volunteering?](#)

A.2 [What do volunteers do?](#)

A.3 [Why do people volunteer?](#)

A.4 [Why involve volunteers?](#)

B. [Concepts and values of volunteering](#)

B.1 [A unique contribution](#)

B.2 [A two-way relationship](#)

A. Definition and nature of volunteering

Volunteering is an important part of society. Most local communities would not exist without volunteers. Understanding exactly what it is and what makes it so special is a very important place to start when considering involving volunteers in any activity.

A.1 What is volunteering?

Volunteering is defined as “the commitment of time and energy, for the benefit of society and the community, the environment or individuals outside (or in addition to) one’s immediate family. It is unpaid and undertaken freely by choice.” Join in, Get Involved: Build a Better Future Volunteering Strategy for NI, 2012

Using this definition, we can look at four key points that underpin the nature of volunteering:

- i. Volunteering involves an **active commitment**. It is more than simply donating money or lending one’s name to a cause. Volunteers get involved.
- ii. Whatever the volunteer’s motivation, the **benefits** of their voluntary activity are felt outside or in addition to their immediate family.
- iii. There can be no element of compulsion or coercion in volunteering. Each individual must make the commitment of his/her own **free choice**.
- iv. Volunteering is essentially **unpaid**. While reimbursing out-of-pocket expenses is good practice, giving or receiving payment for work creates a different kind of relationship to that between a volunteer and the group/organisation with which they volunteer.

A.2 What do volunteers do?

Volunteers are involved in so many activities. They can be involved both through organisations in voluntary, community, church/faith-based or public sectors (sometimes known as formal volunteering), and also at their own neighbourhood level, where they may see themselves as community activists, or “just helping out” or being a good neighbour (informal volunteering).

Volunteers are involved in everything from befriending to fundraising, from trade unions to political parties, from hospitals to museums, from campaigning to counselling, from giving blood to mountain rescue, and many other areas. Recent research in Northern Ireland (collated in the [Continuous Household Survey 2019/20](#)) shows that 18% of the population are involved in formal volunteering and 30% in informal volunteering.

The three most popular types of organisations for volunteering were church/faith-based organisations and groups (39%), sports organisations (29%), and community/neighbourhood groups (17%)- taken from the [Continuous Household Survey in Northern Ireland \(2019/20\)](#).

It is therefore important to recognise that the work volunteers do benefits all kinds of people: young people; older people and families; men and women; those with physical or mental ill health; those with physical, sensory or learning disabilities; the unemployed, employed, retired, students or those who work from home; those with an interest in the arts, in history, in sports; people from minority ethnic backgrounds and other minority groups; local communities, people living on every continent, refugees and the homeless. In fact, it would be hard to think of any group or community that does not benefit from some form of voluntary service. However, it is also critical to be aware how much volunteering benefits the person doing the volunteering.

A.3 Why do people volunteer?

People volunteer for so many reasons and knowing their motivation for volunteering is important in being able to create the best experience for that volunteer. It is good practice to ask people why they are volunteering and what they would like to get out of it. The challenge will be trying to meet everyone's needs and expectations while ensuring that they are contributing to your organisation's aims and objectives- see [B.2 The two-way relationship](#). Research in Northern Ireland suggests that the most commonly cited benefits as a result of volunteering were the following:

- ❖ “It makes me feel better about myself” (67%)
- ❖ “It helps me make a positive contribution to society” (65%)
- ❖ “I had fun!” (63%)- from the [Continuous Household Survey in Northern Ireland \(2019/20\)](#)

The Covid-19 pandemic showed the huge motivation of so many people to help others, often with no thought for themselves- see [Volunteering During the Pandemic & Beyond - A Northern Ireland Perspective](#).

The benefits of volunteering are wide and varied. Research has shown the benefits to one's emotional and physical health, reduced isolation due to increased social networks, and the development of new or improved skills, to name just a few- see [Impact of Volunteering on the Health and Well-being of the Over 50s in Northern Ireland](#).

A.4 Why involve volunteers?

The motivation or reasons for involving volunteers has important implications for every aspect of how you will involve and manage volunteers, from the tasks they do, to the resources spent on their involvement. If organisations only think of involving volunteers in terms of saving money, it implies that “if only we had enough money, we wouldn't need (or want) volunteers in our organisation.” This is an economic consideration and could be described as a ‘**second choice**’ reason for involving volunteers. It is important for organisations of all sizes to give consideration to the “first choice reasons” for involving volunteers in furthering the organisation's mission. For example:

- ✓ Volunteers have perceived credibility with clients, donors, legislators, and others for the very reason that they do not receive a wage from the organisation.

- ✓ It often makes a difference to the recipient of a service that the provider is there purely because he or she wants to be.
- ✓ Volunteers bring a community perspective and often widen the range of backgrounds and skills of the workforce. Volunteers can bring a broader point of view than the paid staff who can sometimes be too close to the work.
- ✓ Volunteers extend the sphere of influence and access to additional people, businesses and organisations in the community. Even the volunteer who helps you once a year becomes another person with knowledge about your work, hopefully telling family and friends too.
- ✓ Volunteers bring the “luxury of focus” to their work. While paid staff members must spread their time and efforts equitably among all clients and projects, volunteers can be recruited to concentrate on selected individuals and issues.
- ✓ Volunteers can be asked to work different hours, in varying locations, and to fill special needs for which staff cannot be justified, yet which are important to individual clients.
- ✓ Volunteers can experiment with new ideas and approaches often being the pioneers in creating new services.

One last thought on the ‘**second choice**’ or economic reasons that you may have for involving volunteers in your organisation- volunteers are not a wholly free resource. To effectively involve volunteers, investment must be made in planning for their involvement, recruitment, support, training and management. To maximise the number and diversity of people that volunteer with you, offering reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses is also strongly recommended. It is therefore more accurate to say that volunteers provide excellent **value for money**, with the consequent understanding that volunteers do not come for free.

Organisations must be willing to invest in this valuable resource in order to get the best value out of it.

B. Concepts and values of volunteering

Recognising and understanding the nature of volunteering and thinking about why you want to involve volunteers (described above) is the first key concept and provides the foundation for a value base for involving volunteers effectively. Having a good strong value-base that is communicated throughout the organisation is essential.

B.1 A unique contribution

The next value that underpins volunteering is that **volunteers have a unique contribution to make** to the organisations, communities and causes for which they work, which is different from, but complementary to that of paid staff (if indeed paid staff are even involved). It is vital to identify the unique qualities of volunteers that are important to your organisation, especially if you are an organisation that already involves staff.

For example:

- ✓ Extra hands and the potential to do more than could be done simply with limited salaried staff; this 'more' might mean an increased amount of service, expanded hours or operation, or different/new types of services.
- ✓ Diversity- volunteers may be different from the salaried staff in terms of age, race, social background, income, educational level, etc. This translates into many more points of view and reaching out to a wider range of people in the community.
- ✓ Skills that augment the ones employees already possess. Ideally, volunteers are recruited exactly because the salaried staff cannot have every skill or talent necessary to do all aspects of the work.
- ✓ Fresh ideas and a range of experiences to shape organisational growth.
- ✓ Community ownership of solutions to mutual problems. Especially if your organisation addresses issue affecting the quality of life, when people participate as volunteers, they empower themselves to improve their own community.
- ✓ Studies have shown that satisfied volunteers frequently are so supportive of the organisations with which they serve that they become donors of money and goods as well. They also support special events and fundraisers by attending and bringing along family and friends.

It helps set the tone for a volunteer involving organisation if you develop a 'value statement' which expresses why you involve volunteers in your organisation and why you feel volunteers can make a unique contribution. It is crucial that this ethos is understood and shared by everyone connected with the organisation because those values will create your culture and will impact on all of your policies and procedures for attracting and managing volunteers. It will make the difference between an organisation that **uses** volunteers and one that **involves** them- see [Resource Guide 1](#) (section 1.1).

B.2 The Two-Way Relationship

Highlighting the unique contribution of volunteers and the value your organisation places on the individuals and their work will set the tone of the relationship between volunteers and the organisation. The traditional view of this relationship is that volunteers make a gift of their time, without any desire or expectation of getting anything back. Although the element of altruism is felt by many to be an essential ingredient in volunteering, this 'one-way' relationship is no longer seen as either realistic or useful by many of those with a direct involvement in volunteering. Instead, volunteering is understood as a relationship that, like most relationships, requires both parties to put something into. This will allow both parties to receive mutual benefits. On this basis, the organisation has a clear responsibility to plan and manage the way in which it involves volunteers in its work, in order to maximise the potential benefits to all concerned- the organisation itself, its beneficiaries and volunteers.

So, the final key value about volunteering is that **volunteering is a two-way relationship**, and this will have a fundamental effect on how the organisation approaches the involvement of volunteers. Acknowledging a two-way relationship with volunteers means that volunteers' reasons for volunteering become a matter of acute interest to the organisation. In fact, much of the challenge of volunteer involvement lies in trying to achieve the best balance between the needs of the organisation and the motivations of the volunteers, the 'best balance' being that which maximises the benefits of volunteering for both parties.

It is important to remember that volunteering is a leisure pursuit and just one of many options available. So, while altruistic reasons for volunteering, e.g. responding to a need in the community, or a sense of duty, are still important, many people are seeking to fulfil personal needs and motivations through volunteering too, such as to meet new people, to learn new skills or even to fill spare time. The implication of this for organisations is simple- volunteers are unlikely to stay with an organisation that fails to recognise the **two-way relationship**.



Summary

Using the above concepts and values as the foundation for volunteer involvement will make the good practice outlined in the following guides much easier to implement.

Remember what we said at the start- best practice looks different in the varying contexts, but regardless of size or sector, how volunteers are involved should ensure that volunteers:

- ✓ Have a positive and enjoyable experience;
- ✓ Are involved in a safe environment where their physical and emotional wellbeing are looked after;
- ✓ Are aware of systems and processes in place to make volunteering effective;
- ✓ Feel valued and respected for what they do.

Therefore, as you read the accompanying guides, remember to contextualise the information to your setting and volunteer activity to decide what degree or formality and flexibility is necessary to ensure the above 4 principles are in place.