A Guide to Formal and Informal Volunteering

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Introduction

Volunteers play an essential role in the Voluntary sector, contributing their time and skills towards helping a huge variety of charitable organisations, individuals and groups in society. A common misconception is that all volunteering takes place within a formally organised network or charity, but in reality lots of people carry out voluntary activities every day in informal ways. This guide outlines the distinction between formal and informal volunteering activities, along with some examples of both.

> *NCVO defines volunteering as 'any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment, individuals or groups other than, or in addition to, close relatives.'*

What is volunteering?

Volunteering is an umbrella term, which encompasses a huge range of activities and ways in which people contribute their time to help others. Voluntary activities can take place on a local, national or international level, and can be categorised as either formal or informal.

Formal volunteering

Formal volunteering involves giving unpaid help through a group, club or organisation (including public, private and voluntary organisations). Formal volunteer roles typically have set hours, clear role descriptions and involve supervision by a member of staff within the group, club or organisation. Many people have formally volunteered with a variety of different organisations at some point in their lives, often dipping in and out of involvement over time.

Examples of formal volunteering

Formal volunteering activities include organising events, administration, raising money, giving advice or counselling others, providing transport, and many other activities. Some more specific examples of formal volunteering roles include:

- Community Health Ambassador
- Delivery driver
- Young person's mentor
- Telephone befriender
- Gardening volunteer
- Museum assistant

Getting involved in formal volunteering

There are lots of volunteering opportunities available and you can get involved in many different ways, in all sorts of places, depending on your interests and concerns. Below is a list of useful resources with current volunteering opportunities to get you started.

- Community Southwark: Southwark volunteering opportunities

- Community Southwark one-on-one volunteer advice appointment: book here

- Contact your local Volunteer Centre here

- Do-it.org: national volunteering database

- Charity Jobs: volunteering opportunities

- Vinspired: volunteering opportunities for young people aged 14-25

- Reach Volunteering: [skills-based volunteering opportunities](#)

Formal volunteering = giving unpaid help through a group, club or organisation

Informal volunteering = giving unpaid help as an individual to people who are not a relative

Informal volunteering

Informal volunteering involves giving unpaid help as an individual to people who are not a relative. This type of voluntary activity is not coordinated by an organisation or institution, and is carried out on a community level or through social action.

According to research carried out by NCVO, over 50% of the population in the UK got involved in informal ways of volunteering at least once in 2018/19. This percentage is likely to have increased during 2020, as local communities rallied together during the COVID-19 pandemic to help out their neighbours and other people in need. For example, doing a grocery shop or collecting a prescription for a shielding or elderly neighbour, organised through a local Mutual Aid Group or neighbourhood WhatsApp group, became part of many people's weekly routine.

Civic participation also comes under the umbrella of informal volunteering, which can be defined as an individual's involvement in local affairs, including community decision making through formal roles or groups.

Examples of informal volunteering

Informal volunteering includes activities like giving advice, grocery shopping, providing transport or childcare for free, for someone who is not a relative or friend. More specific examples of informal volunteering roles include:

- Helping your neighbour with grocery shopping
- Providing free childcare to someone who isn't a relative
- Helping out in your local church
- Driving an older neighbour to an appointment
- Co-ordinating or participating in a Mutual Aid Group