



The Old Court House, Floyds Row, St Aldates, Oxford, OX1 1SS  
Tel 01865 251946 Fax 01865 204138 E-mail [vol@ocva.org.uk](mailto:vol@ocva.org.uk) [www.oxnet.org.uk](http://www.oxnet.org.uk)

## Definitions of volunteering

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.

Generally, volunteering is described as an unpaid activity where someone gives their time to help a not-for-profit organisation or an individual who they are not related to. Here is a selection of recently quoted definitions which you might find useful to refer to:

### Short definitions

- **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 (see below for the full text). 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 National Survey of Volunteering** published in 1997 defined 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

### Longer definitions

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

## **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/>

## **Categorising voluntary activities**

**The Home Office Citizenship Survey** defines informal and formal volunteering as follows: 'Informal volunteering' is defined as giving unpaid help as an individual to people who are not relatives..... 'Formal volunteering' is defined as giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations to benefit other people or the environment (for example, the protection of wildlife or the improvement of public open spaces).

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)

**Last reviewed: May 2009**

For more information, please contact

Volunteering England Information Service

[Information@volunteeringengland.org](mailto:Information@volunteeringengland.org)

Freephone/textphone: 0800 028 3304 (10.30am -12.30pm and 2-4pm Monday to Friday)

[www.volunteering.org.uk/](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/)

Volunteering England

Regent's Wharf

8 All Saints Street

London N1 9RL

-All of Volunteering England's Information Sheets are available at:

[www.volunteering.org.uk/information](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/information)

- For more information on managing volunteers, please visit

[www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice)

**Our thanks to Volunteering England, author of this information sheet**

