



Off the Streets and into Work

OSW Volunteering Guide

A resource for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless

volunteering
opportunities
flexibility
benefits
why
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time
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A volunteer is someone who chooses to give up some of their free time to help others. No one has to volunteer, people give their time because they want to. Anyone can be a volunteer if they want to be, wherever they live and whatever their circumstances are. If you become a volunteer, what you do, where you go and how much time you give is up to you.

'I'd say to other people thinking about volunteering "go for it, give it a go". It gets you out of the hostel, gives you something to do. If you were to walk down the road and meet someone and they asked you what you'd been up, to it's quite a big thing to be able to say "volunteering". It gets you out of that circle of feeling worthless.'

Homeless volunteer

How to use this booklet

This booklet contains all the information that you need to start volunteering so it is quite long. Don't be put off; you won't need to read the whole thing, just the bits that are relevant to you. Use the questions below to decide which bits you need to read:

volunteering



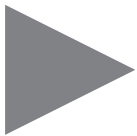
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What sort of volunteer role would suit you?

Why would I want to volunteer?

'I want to get back into paid work and with volunteering you get experience. It's a good option to develop skills and get out of the hostel.' Homeless volunteer

You may think, 'why bother to work if I'm not going to get paid?', but you can get a lot of different things out of volunteering:



- Skills and experience
- A way of trying out different areas of work
- Training
- A routine
- A way of changing things
- A way to share your own experience and skills
- A chance to give something back
- A reason for getting out of bed in the morning
- Confidence
- A way of keeping busy when paid employment isn't an option
- A sense of achievement
- A reference
- A place to meet new people and build networks
- A chance to put into practice skills learnt on courses etc.
- A chance to prove that you're reliable and can do a good job
- Fun

why

Before you start looking for volunteer opportunities, it is important that you decide what you want to get out of it. Is the most important thing for you good training, or is it doing something fun or meeting new people?

What can I do?

There are lots of different volunteer opportunities. You could work directly with people, do office work, do something practical, take on a creative role, or do environmental work; there are as many different volunteer roles as there are paid roles. You will need to think about what sort of work you would like to do. Do you want to do something that you enjoy, or is it more important for you to gain skills? You will also need to think about what sort of organisation you would like to work for. Is there a particular group of people you would like to help, or do you feel strongly about environmental issues or want to campaign about something?

Who can be a volunteer?

'I thought they'd turn me down, but they said, "How soon can you start?"'

Homeless volunteer

As long as you have time to give you can be a volunteer. Sometimes people think that, because they haven't had a lot of work experience or don't have qualifications, they

won't have anything to offer. This isn't true. Think about what you are good at – are you the sort of person that people come to with their problems, are you very organised, are you patient, are you good at physical work? Think about how you have tackled problems in your life and what you've learned. You will have a set and skills and experiences unique to you that may well make you better qualified than some other people to do certain types of work.

How much time should I give?

The amount of time and commitment you will need to give depends on the role you are going into.

Some volunteer roles are one-off; you just turn up on the day and help out. Some require you to work a few hours every week and some are full-time.

Before you start to look for volunteer opportunities you need to think about what would suit you. Think about what else is going on in your life at the moment and how volunteering might fit in.

As well as thinking about how much time you have to give, think about how much energy and commitment you can spare at the moment. Can you give a regular commitment, or do you have days when you couldn't cope with working and need something flexible? If you are worried about how you will cope, it might be better to start off slowly; you can always start out in one role and then move to another when you feel a bit more confident.

Questions to answer before you start

'Volunteering is the chance to do something, something you enjoy. I had the talent there but volunteering helped me and gave me the opportunity to show it. It sets you up to go on and do things.' Homeless volunteer

If you answer the questions below you will start to get a good idea of what your ideal volunteer opportunity would be. This will be really helpful when you start looking at different opportunities and deciding whether they are right for you.



What do you want to get out of volunteering?

i.e. training, meeting new people, developing a routine

What types of work are you interested in?

i.e. office work, gardening, youth work

Who do you want to help?

i.e. older people, homeless people, the environment

What are you good at and what skills and experience do you have?

i.e. IT skills, good with people, experience of being a rough sleeper

When do you want to volunteer and how much time do you want to give?

What sort of commitment do you feel able to make, do you want something flexible or are you happy to go in at set times?

questions

Are there any other factors that are important to you?

Do you mind travelling to get to where you are volunteering or do you want somewhere near where you are staying? Do you have a disability and need an accessible organisation? Do you need a lot of support and supervision or would you rather be more independent?

How do you find opportunities?

Volunteer Centres

You might already know an organisation that you would like to help, in which case you can just contact them directly. However most people like to look at a range of opportunities. There is a Volunteer Centre in nearly every London borough; they will have a database of opportunities in your local area and can help you find an opportunity that is right for you. They will either send you a form to fill in, asking what you want to do, or invite you in for an interview. Then they will search the database to find all the opportunities that fit with what you've said you want to do. It is then up to you to decide which organisations you want to contact, but if you need some support to do this most Centres will be able to help.

Internet

Volunteer Centres upload their opportunities onto an online database called Do-It. You can search the database by area, the times of day or week you want to volunteer, what you want to do or who you'd like to help. Do-It is a good way of seeing what kind of opportunities are available, but most of the Centres involved encourage people to contact them as well so they can talk things through: **www.do-it.org.uk**

I'd like to work with homeless people – can I?

'I appreciated what they had done for me and I wanted to give something back.'

Homeless volunteer

Lots of organisations that work with homeless people have a rule that anyone who has accessed their services can't volunteer for them for another two years. However, there are organisations that are actively trying to recruit homeless or ex-homeless people because they believe that their experience of homelessness will help to offer a much better service. By the end of July 2004, there will be a list of homelessness organisations in London who are happy to take on homeless and ex-homeless volunteers on OSW's website (www.osw.org.uk).

homeless

When you apply to volunteer with one of these organisations, they will probably ask you how you might cope with going from being a service user to being someone who is helping to provide that service. Lots of people find this a really positive experience, but sometimes people find it hard to shift from one to the other. Generally, people who have been through something are very well placed to advise those in a similar situation, but sometimes volunteers in these positions can find it emotionally stressful. It is a very individual thing and it is worth thinking about how you think you personally would cope.

Application forms, interviews and references

Not every potential volunteer will be suitable for every role. Organisations will need to check that you have the skills they need and that you are available when they need you. They will also want to check why you want to volunteer and whether their organisation can offer you what you need. To make sure that you and they are both getting what you want, they will have some kind of selection procedure. This will vary according to the organisation and the role.

When you contact an organisation to ask about volunteering for them, you will need to ask about their application process. A lot of places will send out an 'application form'. This usually isn't used to select people, but just to collect some information about you before they meet you. In some places the form will be very formal, like an application form for paid work, in others it will just be a registration form to collect your details.

You may also be called in for an interview. This is usually just a chat about the volunteer role, why you want to do it and whether you have all the skills they are looking for. Answering the questions at the beginning of this booklet is a good way to prepare because those are the sorts of things that they are likely to ask you. Remember that the interview is as much about you choosing

them as about them choosing you. Ask lots of questions about what it will be like volunteering with them to help you decide whether they are the right organisation for you.

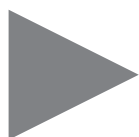
Organisations may ask you to provide references. These don't have to be work references. Generally, they just need to be from someone who has known you for a while. It could be someone who has worked with you on a training scheme or in a hostel, a probation officer or social worker or sometimes just a friend.

references

Useful things to know before you start volunteering

What to expect

Every organisation involving volunteers is different. Some are very good at working with volunteers and some aren't as good. Different types of organisation suit different people. Some volunteers like very relaxed, laid-back organisations, and some people prefer to work in a more formal organisation with more rigid rules and regulations. The only way to find an organisation that is a 'good fit' is to look at a few different opportunities. There are many more organisations looking for volunteers than there are people who want to volunteer, so you can be picky and only offer time to organisations that make you feel welcome and that you click with.



Different organisations manage volunteers in different ways, but there are a number of things that a good organisation should offer a volunteer.

- Reimbursement of travel expenses
- A clear role so you know what you will be doing
- Enough training to be able to do the role
- Support and supervision to check that you are coping with their work and are enjoying it
- Insurance cover
- A safe environment to work in

What if it goes wrong?

'It doesn't affect your benefits so if you don't like it you haven't lost anything.' Homeless volunteer

If things go wrong when you start volunteering or if you decide the role is not right for you, the best thing to do is to talk to the person managing you to see if there is anything that can be changed to make things better. Remember that volunteering is not like paid work: you are choosing to give your time, so organisations have to be more flexible (if possible) with volunteers. If the situation cannot be sorted out, then it may be best to leave and try to find a more suitable opportunity. Each organisation involving volunteers is different. Just because volunteering wasn't right for you in one organisation doesn't mean other roles and other organisations won't suit you.

Does volunteering affect benefits?

If you are on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), you can do as much voluntary work as you like as long as you are still looking for work, are willing to go for an interview within 48 hours notice, and don't receive any pay. It is fine to get money to cover your travel or lunch. This doesn't count as pay because it is a reimbursement of money you have already spent. Income support, Incapacity Benefit, Severe Disablement Allowance, Housing

Benefit and Council Tax Benefit should not be affected as long as you don't receive any money other than reimbursement of expenses.

JobCentre Plus asks people to inform them if they start volunteering. Most benefits advisers see volunteering as a positive step towards gaining the skills and experience to find paid work. However, advisers are not always trained about the rules concerning volunteering and sometimes they will tell people they can't volunteer or that they can only volunteer for a few hours a week. If there is any confusion, the rules about all types of benefits are explained on pages 41-43 of the JobCentre Plus leaflet WK1

'Financial help if you work or are looking for work'. The leaflet is on the JobCentre Plus website at: www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk/documents/pflwk1v2.pdf

There is also a leaflet specifically about JSA and volunteering called 'Volunteering while unemployed helps others and can help you'. It is on the Volunteering England website at: www.volunteering.org.uk/centre/JSAL7.pdf

Police Checks

'If you've been in trouble once then you're constantly being told that you're no good at anything, but here I am doing something good.'

Homeless volunteer

Most volunteer opportunities will not need you to be police checked, but if you will be working with children or vulnerable people, the organisation may need to run a police check on you before you start. Organisations should only be looking for things that would suggest someone might be a danger to clients, so most past convictions will be irrelevant. If you have a criminal record and are applying for a role where you will be police checked, it is probably best to bring this up as soon as possible, rather than waiting for the check to come through. Organisations are legally obliged to respect your confidentiality and not to share information they have received via police checks with anyone else.

When someone is police checked they will be required to provide addresses for the last five years. This will need to include hostels and temporary addresses. If you have had periods sleeping rough, then you need to note these down as well, along with the approximate area and dates. You will also need to show ID to the organisation that is having the check done. There is a long list of potential ID, so there shouldn't be a problem even if you don't have a passport or bank details.

Useful contacts

Volunteer Centres

You can find out where your nearest Centre is by ringing Volunteering England:

0121 633 4555

You can also find out from the Do-It website:

http://www.do-it.org.uk/find_opp/vb_finder/

Central London Volunteer Centres

Camden: 020 7424 9990,
www.camdenvb.org.uk

Hackney: 020 7241 4443,
www.volunteerhackney.co.uk

Hammersmith and Fulham:
020 8741 9876,
www.hfvda.co.uk

Islington: 020 7686 6800,
www.islingtonvolunteer.org.uk

Kensington and Chelsea:
020 8960 3722,
www.voluntarywork.org.uk

Lewisham: 020 8699 7118,
www.volunteeringlewisham.org.uk

Southwark: 020 7635 8783,
www.vias.org.uk

Tower Hamlets: 020 7377 0956,
www.vath.org.uk

Westminster: 020 7402 8076,
www.volunteer.co.uk

One-off opportunities

One-off opportunities are a chance to help out without making a long-term commitment. They tend to be very practical and hands on. You can search Do-It for opportunities in your area.

CSV has a project called Go London that organises a range of different one-off opportunities across London every weekend. Anyone can help out. You just need to call them or check on their website to find out when and where the activity is taking place.
www.csv.org.uk/Volunteer/Part-time/GO/GO+London.htm
020 7643 1341

BTCV works with volunteers on one-off environmental opportunities. They run day projects at sites within greater London to improve the urban environment, both for wildlife and people. Anyone can help out. Check their website or give them a call for more details.
www.geocities.com/btcvlondon/index.htm
020 7278 4294.

Residential opportunities

CSV places volunteers in full-time residential opportunities. Volunteers get accommodation, food and a weekly allowance. CSV has a policy of finding a placement for anyone who wants to volunteer and they say specifically they welcome homeless people as volunteers. Lots of people find this type of volunteering a valuable experience. However, you do need to commit to volunteer for at least 4 months. Because you receive accommodation and an allowance, you will not be able to claim JSA or Housing Benefit while you are a volunteer, so you would need to consider carefully whether residential volunteering is right for you.

www.csv.org.uk

020 7643 1428

Advice and information

Volunteering England runs a freephone helpline **0800 028 3304** which gives advice and information for volunteers and for people working with volunteers. You can ring them if you have a query about volunteer's rights, benefits, police checks etc., or to find out more information about different types of volunteering, such as residential volunteering or volunteering overseas.

OSW would like to acknowledge the input of all the organisations working with the Volunteer Development Project and thank everyone who gave advice and feedback about this guide

Supported by
BRIDGE HOUSE TRUST



Off the Streets and into Work (OSW) is a registered charity with unrivalled expertise in providing training and employment services to people who are homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, across London

We collaborate with a range of strategic and service delivery partners to offer joined-up solutions to some of the complex problems that face people at the margins of society



Off the Streets and into Work

4th Floor, The Pavilion
1 Newhams Row
London SE1 3UZ
Tel: 020 7089 2722
Fax: 020 7089 2750
Email: info@osw.org.uk
Web: www.osw.org.uk
Registered office as above
Registered Charity No. 1078212
Company Limited by Guarantee
Registered in England No. 3811007