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thinking of volunteering?

a step by step
guide



volunteer centres

Ionaid d'Oibrí Deonacha na hÉireann

IRELAND

This step-by-step guide is the first in a series of guides offering advice to people who think they might like to volunteer but are unsure how to go about it

The bottom half of the page features several overlapping, abstract shapes in various shades of blue. These shapes are fluid and organic, resembling stylized waves or flowing fabric. The colors range from a light, sky-blue to a deep, dark navy blue, creating a layered and dynamic visual effect.



step one who can help me?

Your local volunteer bureau (or centre) offer an advice, placement and support service to people who are interested in becoming volunteers. Staff there can help you identify the type of volunteering you would like to do and put you in touch with organisations that need volunteers.

This booklet outlines some of the points you might need to consider before committing yourself to becoming a volunteer. It also covers matters relating to what you can and should expect from your volunteering opportunity. The points and issues covered here are the sorts of things that staff will cover with you when you visit a volunteer bureau.

Volunteer bureaux also offers advice, training and support to organisations that involve volunteers and there are other Step-by-Step Guides with specific information aimed at these organisations. Some bureaux offer training programmes on volunteer management. If you would like to find out more about managing volunteers in your organisation, please contact your local bureau and they will be happy to assist.

step two
some questions
to ask yourself



Why do I want to volunteer?

Volunteering has a lot to offer people from all types of backgrounds and walks of life. People volunteer for many different reasons. Some of the reasons people choose to volunteer include a desire to:

- Do something they really enjoy.
- Make use of special interests and talents.
- Learn new skills and develop new interests.
- Meet new people with similar interests.
- Make new friends.
- Find out more about a job or type of work which they are considering as a career.
- Have a chance to take some responsibility and make decisions.
- Gain valuable training and experience which may lead to paid employment.

If you decide that you would like to get involved in volunteering but you are not sure exactly what you would like to do, then think about WHY you want to volunteer. This can be a useful way of helping you to focus on the sort of volunteering you want to undertake.

When can I volunteer?

How much time do I have to give?

What kind of work would I like to do?

If you are clear about why you want to volunteer, you may have some idea about the sort of volunteering that you would like to undertake. There are, however, a number of other factors which may influence the type of volunteering which you choose to do, including your current commitments and responsibilities. The following questions should help you to focus on what you would like to do and the time you have to offer:

- How much time can you spare for volunteering? Remember your other commitments (family, hobbies, employment) and don't over commit yourself.
- Are your circumstances likely to change in the near future?
- What period of time can you commit to volunteering? For example, one day? A month? Six months? Some voluntary projects require you to stay for a minimum period of time, so check before you decide on a project.
- How much time do you wish to commit to volunteering? For example, one day a month, one day a week, more or less?
- What times of the day are you free? Morning? Afternoon? Evening?
- What days of the week are you free?
- Do you have your own transport? If not, is it easy for you to use public transport to get to your place of volunteering?
- In what ways do you feel you can best contribute?
- What are your particular skills and interests? What do you really enjoy doing?
- Do you prefer to work with people or to do something practical?
- If you prefer working with people, is this on a one-to-one basis or in a group?

- Would you prefer to do something you have already done, using skills you have already acquired, or would you prefer the challenge of doing something new?
- What skills and interests do you already possess? Many everyday skills are useful when volunteering. Make sure you don't overlook skills such as writing letters, decorating, talking, listening, DIY, driving, reading, shopping, sport, leisure and outdoor activities, entertainment, gardening etc.
- If you want to work with people, have you identified a particular group of people with whom you would like to work? Many skills can be used with many different groups, but there may be some people you would like to work with more than others (e.g. children under 5, young people, the elderly, families, people in hospital, homeless people, people with physical disability or learning difficulty).



step three
some questions to
ask the organisation



Once you've found a possible placement it is worth asking the organisation the following questions:

- Can they give you a clear description of the work you will be expected to do?
- Who will show you what to do and supervise and support you in your work? Will you get supervision sessions or will it be less formal than that?
- What about expenses? Volunteers should not be out of pocket for the work they do. Ideally, though it won't always be possible, an organisation should cover expenses such as travel, lunch and childcare.
- What about insurance? e.g. if you are doing driving, do you need to tell your car insurance company?
- How often will you be expected to do voluntary work and for how many hours each time?
- How long is the volunteering likely to last?
- Who do you tell if you can't make it that week?



step four types of voluntary work

The range of voluntary work available is endless! Think of any activity or job and the chances are that someone, somewhere is doing it as a volunteer. Below are some of the types of volunteering opportunities that are available through your volunteer bureau and keep in mind this list is by no means exhaustive!

Conservation, the environment and gardening

Conservation volunteers repair footpaths, clear ponds and waterways, plant trees, build dry-stone dykes, create nature trails - the list is endless. The work can be done at weekends. You could help out at a community garden project or do simple maintenance for someone who is unable to look after their own garden.

Learning disabilities

People with learning disabilities have difficulty understanding new or complex information, learning new skills or coping independently.

Volunteers can:

- help with activities, sports and crafts and social clubs, youth clubs and resource centres.
- provide one to one support to families or individuals as befrienders or advocates.
- assist at summer playschemes for children with learning disabilities.

Mental health

Mental health problems come in a variety of forms. Many involve feelings of depression, anxiety and confusion, sometimes to an extent which makes it difficult for the person to cope with everyday life. Only a small number of people experiencing mental health problems are admitted to hospital. Most are treated and supported in their community.

Volunteers can:

- assist at drop-in centres and social groups by helping with activities, chatting to people or providing a listening ear.
- provide one to one support as befrienders or advocates.

Advice work

Volunteer advice workers offer confidential advice and information to members of the public. Some advice centres give a very wide range of information e.g. Citizens Information Centres. Others are more specialist e.g. working with homeless people or people with a disability. Advice agencies look for a long term commitment from volunteers and training can last up to three months.

Adult basic education

Many adults and young people want to improve their reading, writing or numeracy. Adult basic education provides tuition in groups with paid and volunteer tutors.

Volunteers must attend a training course and be prepared to give a long term commitment, perhaps helping once or twice a week for a minimum of a year.

Volunteers can:

- tutor people who have difficulty with basic skills.
- teach English as a second language.
- help deaf students with language development.
- help students who have a disability.
- work with people who have speech and language difficulties as a result of a stroke.

Fundraising

Charities need to have diverse and imaginative ways of raising funds for their work.

Volunteers can

organise or take part in sponsored events, street collections, fun runs, etc.; help in charity shops; be on a fund raising committee.

Office work

Many organisations have an ongoing need for volunteers to do office administration such as reception, filing or typing. Others need volunteers to help out at busy times e.g. publicity campaigns or fundraising drives.

Volunteers can do

- reception and administration work.
- financial or management committee tasks.
- computing.
- 'one off' pieces of work such as setting up a database, producing publicity material or devising a marketing strategy.

Older people

Most opportunities to volunteer in this field are with frail older people or dementia sufferers, and are mainly in the daytime.

They include

- helping at lunch clubs or day centres - perhaps serving teas and lunches or assisting with quizzes, games and reminiscing activities.
- delivering 'Meals on Wheels' or library books to housebound people.
- befriending and home visiting.
- helping in residential homes and hospitals e.g. reading to patients, playing board games.

Homeless

With people living in temporary or hostel accommodation, or those sleeping rough.

Volunteers can

- help at drop in or night shelters, providing hot drinks and meals and giving support.
- be trained to give information and advice.
- work alongside paid workers in outreach work on the streets.

Practical assistance

Some organisations need DIY / building volunteers to paint and decorate, carry out repairs or put up shelves.

Befriending

Befriending involves giving support and friendship to someone who may be going through a difficult period, is feeling lonely, or is adjusting to a major change in their life.

Befriending schemes can support older people, lone parents, families with children under five, adults with disabilities or health problems.

Volunteer befrienders are matched with a client (perhaps because they share an interest or are of a similar age). They meet on a regular basis, perhaps to go shopping, go to the cinema or simply to have a chat over a cup of coffee. Befriending may aim to encourage the client's independence, build their self-confidence or offer social contact beyond their immediate family.

Befrienders are carefully selected and trained and receive ongoing support.

Physical disability

Volunteers can work with groups dealing with specific conditions such as arthritis, cancer, or epilepsy or with more general disability organisations.

Volunteers provide one-to-one support as a tutor, befriender or peer counsellor.

HIV/Aids/Drugs

With individuals and families affected by HIV AIDS or drug dependency,

Volunteers can:

- help out at a drop in or information centre.
- be a befriender in a 'buddy' scheme.
- Provide practical help such as gardening, driving, baby-sitting, or painting and decorating.
- participate in preventative, educational and awareness raising work.

Driving

Many disabled or older people are unable to leave their homes due to a lack of suitable transport.

Volunteer drivers provide a vital service helping them to get out and about, perhaps to a day centre or social club. Some organisations have their own vehicles whilst others need drivers with their own car. Perhaps the best known volunteer drivers are the 'Meals on Wheels' fleet.

The insurance requirements of organisations may differ, but usually a volunteer has to be aged over 23 years and have a clean driving licence. Minibus drivers may be required to sit a test. Volunteers using their own car will normally be paid petrol expenses.

Hospital work

- visiting and befriending patients.
- helping in hospital shops.
- providing trolley and library services.
- escorting patients on outings.
- helping with social activities.

Children and young people

- Creches and playgroups for under fives.
- 5-12 years: after school clubs, junior youth clubs and holiday playschemes helping with games, arts and crafts, music and sport.
- 12 years plus: youth clubs and 'drop-in' centres providing varied social, leisure and outdoor activities, as well as 'issue' based work e.g. Health promotion or drugs awareness.
- One to one support for children who are experiencing difficulties at school or at home.
- There are also well know youth organisations such as the Scouts and Girl Guides.

Volunteers working with children must be prepared to undergo a Garda check.

Other areas of volunteering include:

- support for victims of crime.
- work with ex-offenders.
- telephone helplines.
- bereavement /relationship counselling.
- mediation services.

Residential

You may wish to get involved in voluntary work and actually 'live in'.

Team volunteering

Groups of friends or colleagues can get together for a one-off volunteering project e.g. painting a mural, creating a wildlife garden, decorating premises or organising an outing for a group of people.

step five
volunteer and
organisation expectations
what can I expect?
what should I expect?



As a volunteer you are offering your valuable time, energy and skills to an organisation - free of charge! There are basic conditions which you should expect of the organisation you are helping with and there are also reasonable things that the organisation should be able to expect from you. Below are some guidelines about what these things might be.

A clear idea of what you will be doing

Groups that take on volunteers should be able to give the volunteer a clear idea of what they will be doing before they begin their volunteering assignment. This can come in the form of a role description, a volunteer position description or an assignment summary.

Most organisations meet with or interview potential volunteers before they begin their volunteer assignment. This meeting will usually be an informal two-way “interview” or chat. The person will be trying to find out if you will fit in. You should also try to find out whether the organisation/ project is what you imagined it to be, and whether you really want to be involved with the particular organisation/project. Any questions that you may have about your role could be asked at this stage.

Some of the questions that you might ask on your first meeting/visit to the organisation might be:

- What exactly will I be doing?
- Is there anything that I will not be allowed to do?
- How many hours will I be expected to commit myself to and when will these hours be?
- Will I be working alongside lots of other people or mostly on my own?
- Are there any particular skills which volunteers are expected to have?
- What kind of training do you offer?
- When will training take place and how much of my time will it take up?
- How soon will I be able to start?

Training

Any group which takes on volunteers should give you some kind of introduction/induction to the organisation and to the activity you will be doing.

You should get any training you need to be able to cope with the tasks demanded of you before you start volunteering, as well as any ongoing training you need to develop your skills. You should never be put in a situation which you do not feel you have the skills or experience to cope with. Don't be put off by the word 'training' - these courses are usually fun to do, you may meet other volunteers and learn a lot.

Also, think about your own needs and motivations for volunteering. If you want to develop new skills and gain volunteering experience that may help you obtain employment, then structured training opportunities will be important in the organisation that you choose.

Support/Supervision

There should be a named person who is responsible for you while you are volunteering, and you should have regular access to that person to discuss how things are going. This person should ensure that each volunteer is given adequate support.

Don't be afraid to ask questions and don't feel you are a nuisance.

You should also know who to contact if you have any questions, concerns or if anything goes wrong, and how to find them.

Equal opportunities

You should be able to volunteer for an organisation without feeling that you are being treated badly or differently to other volunteers because of your race or nationality, because you are a woman or because you are a man, because of your age, because of your sexuality, on the basis of any health problems you have or may have had, or for any other reason that can't be justified by the nature of the work you will be doing (e.g. a support group for women might only accept women volunteers).

If you do experience any kind of discrimination then you should feel that the organisation you are volunteering with will take this seriously, support you and challenge what is happening. Many organisations have an Equal Opportunities Policy stating their commitment to treating all volunteers fairly and equally and explaining what steps will be taken if any problems occur - you should be given a copy of this.

If you don't feel able to talk to anyone within the organisation then staff at your local volunteer bureau will be happy to talk with you about what has happened and to help you decide what to do next.

Out-of-pocket expenses

Volunteers are not paid for the hours they give to an organisation; volunteering is something you do for free. However you should equally not find yourself out-of-pocket for the volunteering you do. That way, people who are on a low income aren't prevented from volunteering. You can reasonably expect to be repaid for the cost of travelling from your home to the place where you are volunteering. If you are volunteering over lunchtime many organisations will provide lunch or pay for you to buy a sandwich. If you need any special equipment or clothing then this should be provided by the organisation. A few organisations will pay for the cost of child-care or care of any adults who are dependent on you, if you want to volunteer but have caring responsibilities.

Although organisations that register with volunteer bureaux are asked to refund all of these expenses, many say that they cannot afford to pay for some or all of them. If it is important that you have your expenses repaid then your volunteer bureau can tell you which organisations will do so or, if they don't know, they can find out for you.

Some people feel uncomfortable taking the cost of their expenses from a group, especially if it is a charity or good cause. You should remember that you are giving your time for free; it is only fair that volunteering doesn't cost you anything more than your time! We encourage all volunteers to take up expenses so that those who need to do not feel stigmatised. Those who do not wish to keep their expenses can repay them as a donation.



Enjoyment!

Volunteering should be something you enjoy doing and from which you get some feeling of fulfilment. Over time with an organisation you should be able to develop your skills and your role so that you remain interested. If you find that you are not enjoying what you do then ask yourself why this is. For example you might feel that it is time to do something different, either with the organisation or somewhere else. Or is it that you are not happy with the way you are being treated by other volunteers, or paid staff, or the organisation itself? Perhaps what you are doing is not what you expected or wanted. Whatever the reason, you should feel able to discuss your concerns in the first instance with the volunteer organiser or named person who is responsible for you or, if this is not possible, with somebody else within the organisation. You are always welcome to come and talk things through with a member of staff at your local volunteer bureau.

Sometimes people try a number of different kinds of volunteering before they find the thing they really want to do. So don't be embarrassed to come back to the volunteer bureau and look at what other possibilities there might be!



step six
what will the organisation
expect from me?



Just as you need to ask questions about an organisation, so will they have questions to ask of you. Organisations have different ways of trying to find out if a volunteer is suited to their particular project.

For example, they may ask you to:

- Visit the organisation, to have a look around and have a chat.
- Fill in an application form.
- Supply references before you begin your voluntary work with them.
- You may be asked about your personal circumstances, since some organisations need volunteers to stay with them for a reasonable length of time.
- Some organisations may ask you more personal questions. They may ask you about your health or criminal convictions, and some may have an age limit for their volunteers. This particularly applies to statutory agencies such as hospitals, probation or social services.
- Organisations are entitled not to accept a volunteer if they feel a volunteer might not be suitable for the work of the organisation.



References

If your volunteering means that you may be involved with people who are vulnerable, visiting people at their homes or in one-to-one unsupervised situations, then the organisation may ask you for references from people who know you very well and can say that you are reliable and trustworthy. You shouldn't be alarmed by this - every volunteer will be asked for them in the same way.

Usually a referee should be someone who has known you for some time and who is not related to you. This could be a previous employer or someone who you have volunteered for, a social worker or key-worker, a doctor, health visitor or probation worker, someone who has taught you recently, a landlord or landlady, or a colleague or friend. If you are really finding it hard to think of anybody then talk about this with the person who has asked you for a reference or go and talk to someone at your local volunteer bureau.

Garda clearance

If you want to volunteer with children, young people or vulnerable people, then as well as references you will probably also be asked to allow the organisation to check that you do not have any criminal convictions which would stop you being allowed to do this type of volunteering right away. Don't be discouraged if it takes the organisation a long time to get in touch with you again as Garda clearance can take up to 8 weeks.

If you do have a criminal record and you are worried that this might affect the type of volunteering you will be able to do, then talk with a member of staff at the volunteer bureau, in complete confidence, about this.

Commitment

It should be clear at the beginning of your volunteering how much time you have to offer and what days and times you will be expected to do your volunteering. Once this has been agreed, then you should give the organisation as much notice as possible so that they can cover for any absences. Of course, it is reasonable for you to take time off for holidays, medical appointments or special events, as long as you give the organisation as much notice as you can.

There may be times when you really can't do something you have promised - everyone occasionally has a crisis which stops them doing what they planned. However, you should get in touch with the organisation (before you were due to be there if possible, or as soon as possible afterwards) to explain what has happened. Most people will be sympathetic if you explain that there has been an emergency.

To do what has been agreed

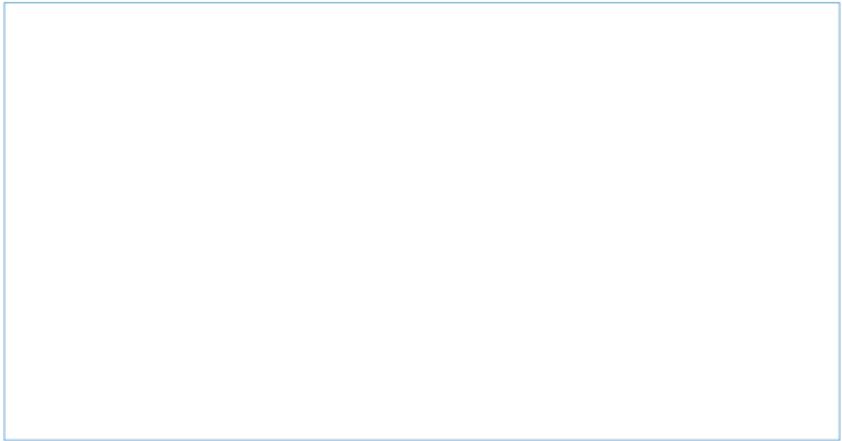
It is important that you stick to the tasks that you agreed to do. You should not take it upon yourself to involve yourself in tasks or activities that are not your responsibility, or to do things in a different way, without discussing this with someone in the organisation first. It may be that the organisation would be happy for you to take on more responsibilities, or move into different areas of its work, or make suggestions about how things could be done differently. But the people working around you need to know what is going on and to agree that they are happy with this.

To respect confidentiality

If you are volunteering with an organisation which offers support or services to people then it may be that you will hear or read details about people's private lives or health that is confidential. You should respect that such information is confidential and should not be passed on to or talked about with anyone outside of the organisation, however well-meaning your intentions. To do so would be to abuse the trust that a person has placed in the organisation.

And finally...

Enjoy your volunteering experience, it should be fun! If at any time you have any questions or experience any problems related to your volunteering role please do contact your local volunteer bureau to talk things through with a member of staff; as well as finding you suitable voluntary work, they are there to offer you support if you need it.



Volunteer Centres Ireland is the national infrastructure of volunteer bureaux and centres across the country and is supported by the Irish Government through the Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs.



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