

## Volunteering



This factsheet focuses on volunteering and its benefits to community cohesion. It aims to provide some useful information and pointers, as well as offering some tangible reasons as to why and how volunteering can be a useful resource when it comes to bringing communities together, and how, therefore, it can positively add to community cohesion.

### **General Benefits of Volunteering**

The general benefits of volunteering are well documented. Indeed, there are many reasons for volunteering, some of them obviously so powerful and persuasive<sup>1</sup> that they appear quite appropriately in our assessment of the benefits of volunteering on community cohesion.

This factsheet will not dwell on the general benefits as we are concerned specifically with community cohesion. Nevertheless the following list – by no means exhaustive – gives some indication as to what these general benefits might be:

- Meeting people and making new friends.
- Making use of skills and enthusiasm.
- Developing communication skills.
- Sharing skills, interests and experiences.
- Gaining new experiences.
- Wanting new or different responsibilities.
- Achieving something new or positive.
- Feeling useful, needed, valued and appreciated.
- Improving personal health.
- Simple enjoyment!
- Making good use of spare time.
- Developing people skills.
- Learning or improving other personal skills.
- Building on personal interests and talents.
- Improving employment opportunities.
- Wanting to be challenged as a person.
- Building self-esteem and confidence.
- Achieving personal satisfaction.
- Putting something back.
- Making a difference!

Moreover, there are many organisations and websites (globally, nationally, and locally) that focus in some detail on volunteering in general.

The following serve as good examples, addressing the question of why people volunteer.

- Volunteering LeicesterShire: [www.volunteeringleicestershire.org.uk/i-want-to-volunteer/](http://www.volunteeringleicestershire.org.uk/i-want-to-volunteer/)
- Volunteering England: [www.volunteering.org.uk/IWantToVolunteer/](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/IWantToVolunteer/)

### **Benefits to new migrants and communities**

The 'i-to-i' organisation, a volunteer travel company that focuses on volunteering opportunities overseas, has identified a number of key general reasons as to why people volunteer.<sup>2</sup>

Amongst these there was also a specific focus on the benefits of volunteering in different countries, including "*learning a foreign language.*" This is undoubtedly a key benefit to volunteering in another country, or even within another community where different languages are spoken. It should also be said that irrespective of whether this is a primary motivation to volunteer in such circumstances, the language issue is not something that can be ignored. People need to communicate, after all!

<sup>1</sup> Meeting new people and improving personal skills, for example.

<sup>2</sup> From <http://www.i-to-i.com/why-do-people-volunteer.html>.

Of course there is no difference in this respect between Britons volunteering abroad and non-Britons volunteering in this country.

There is evidence that economic migrants have been volunteering in significant numbers in the UK since the large-scale migration of people from Eastern Europe that followed the formal inclusion of the so-called 'Accession 8' states into the European Union in 2004.<sup>3</sup>

In February 2007, whilst he was still Chancellor, the current Prime Minister Gordon Brown, stated in a well-publicised speech that he felt that new migrants should be encouraged to volunteer and do community work prior to any application for UK citizenship.<sup>4</sup>

Improving English language skills is something that any new migrant who has a view towards gaining UK citizenship has to take seriously and practically address. The UK government has focused on the ability to speak English in relation to the 'Life in the UK Test'.<sup>5</sup> The Government has also stressed the importance of a common language (in this context, speaking English) as a key factor in improving community cohesion.

It should be added that volunteering in general (not solely the development of language skills) has become increasingly important with regards to gaining citizenship.



In addition to both the language factor and the general benefits of volunteering, the following are likely to be motivating factors for new migrants:

- Volunteering may lead to employment, or at least increase the possibility and chances of employment. Obviously, this is immediately relevant to both refugees and economic migrants. However, although asylum seekers in the main are not allowed to work until a positive decision on their claim is confirmed, volunteering may still be beneficial for them in terms of employment in the longer term if, for example, links are retained with particular employers or their voluntary activities can be shown as evidence on curriculum vitae.

<sup>3</sup> The Accession 8 states being the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

<sup>4</sup> See 'Migrants should volunteer' ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/6399457.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6399457.stm)).

<sup>5</sup> See UK Border Agency, 'Life in the UK Test' (<http://www.lifeintheuktest.gov.uk/>).

- Retaining an involvement in a personal interest and/or career area. This is a key benefit to anyone who is unable for whatever reason to pursue or retain their formal employment in a particular area. Following on from the previous point, this can be tremendously important for asylum seekers who may have been employed in a professional capacity in their respective countries of origin, but, as a result of UK law, are unable to undertake paid work whilst their asylum claims are outstanding.
- Increased knowledge of the workings of an organisation and indeed of a work area.
- Increased knowledge of 'the system'. Anyone new to an environment, particularly a new country with its myriad of laws, structures, cultural practices etc, is likely to feel the benefit of involvement in areas (such as volunteering) where opportunities to ask questions and find out for themselves how things work are part of the equation.
- Addressing issues/questions which members of 'host communities' may assume is general knowledge. In many ways, this is the converse of the previous point in that organisations as a whole (and indeed people more generally) can benefit when they are asked to explain and account for things that ordinarily are taken for granted or actions that appear to be 'second nature'. Such a situation can be positively beneficial in illuminating the real reasons why organisations exist, why they act as they do, for whom and how.
- Giving something back in a new environment. For people from new communities, the opportunity to contribute, to do something positive, and importantly, to be seen to be doing so, is a massive benefit in their attempts to 'feel at home' and be accepted as part of a new social context.
- Lastly, of course, in undertaking voluntary work, people new to communities will be meeting and mixing with longer-standing residents and local people who have been living and working in that community for a while if not all their lives. The opportunity, therefore, for people to mix and learn from each other is massive. We will explore this further in the next section.

As background information, Volunteering England has a specific Good Practice Bank focusing on 'Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants as Volunteers'<sup>6</sup>. It includes a wealth of information, practical tips and good links.

### **Benefits to community cohesion**

Student Volunteering UK identified a number of reasons for volunteering in 2002. Among them was an important implication for community cohesion, namely:

*"You experience diversity and integrate with the community."*<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, the afore-mentioned 'i-to-i' organisation mentioned the following as a key reason for people volunteering overseas:

*"View a culture from the inside."*<sup>8</sup>

Whilst an increased awareness of diversity in terms of personal knowledge is important in itself, we can take the agenda much further by suggesting the following ways in which acting on that increased knowledge and awareness can lead to a variety of positive benefits in terms of community cohesion.

<sup>6</sup> Go to <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/resources/goodpracticebank/Specialist+Themes/Refugees+and+Asylum+Seekers/>.

<sup>7</sup> From <http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/volunteering/aboutthecentre/whyvolunteer>.

<sup>8</sup> From <http://www.i-to-i.com/why-do-people-volunteer.html>.

## Volunteering:

- Brings people together in shared activity. The focus is therefore on the activity itself – acting collectively on shared and agreed tasks in shared and agreed ways. The activity, whatever it is, is therefore the thing that brings people together and the thing in which there is already some shared and consensual interest. From such collective activity can emanate communication and social bonding. People from a whole variety of backgrounds are therefore united naturally through the task itself, rather than having to perhaps ‘enforce’ cohesion through, for example, talking and instigating communication *per se*.
- Builds up trust between communities. From such shared activity, relationships between different people are formed and are nurtured through natural human interaction, particularly when focusing on given tasks. This is tremendously important when people come from communities in which there has not been a tradition or legacy of communication, shared space or common interest.
- Builds up trust between community members and organisations. This can play a vital role, particularly when again there is no or little history of previous engagement. Examples could include local authorities encouraging volunteering in their activities from people from particular ethnic minority communities, or the police service instigating opportunities within their work area for young people who perhaps see the service only in negative or confrontational ways.
- Plays an important part in breaking down barriers and addressing myths and misconceptions. This is simply a consequence of good communication, trust and confidence, which – as we’ve seen from the above – can come from shared activities. Once people get to know each other, they tend to open up more and explore more difficult and sensitive areas (as are often involved in myths and misconceptions), as the ‘comfort boundary’ – if we can use such terminology – gets extended.
- May provide a step towards employment and an increasingly diverse workforce. The dangers of segregated communities have been raised in a number of national community cohesion reports.<sup>9</sup> Such ‘segregation’ may exist in a number of different areas, including the workplace. Volunteering can therefore play a part in widening the pool of people interested and active in a particular work area and enabling interaction to take place that can be then ‘brought into’ the work environment.
- As a result, volunteering could play a significant role in assisting organisations to meet their statutory duties of employing a diverse workforce and improving race and wider community relations.



As a concluding comment on this section, it is well worth pointing out that community cohesion is not necessarily an easy thing to achieve.

It doesn't necessarily come naturally, and needs to be continually worked at.

This should not be a surprise, as human relationships in the main also need constant work, care and attention in order for them to succeed and to be as vibrant and enriching as possible.

However, what we've tried to point out with respect to volunteering, is that if people use the skills, facilities and activities at their disposal, and combine that with commitment and motivation, lasting community cohesion is perfectly possible and may be much easier to attain than people actually think!

<sup>9</sup> For example, the Cantle Report.

## How to volunteer in Leicestershire?

There are many ways to volunteer. One way is simply to approach an organisation and group and ask if they have any volunteering opportunities available. Or just ask people you know if they know of any opportunities.

Volunteer Centres<sup>10</sup> in Leicestershire provide direct services (transport, befriending, carers projects etc), though they don't now deal with volunteer brokerage as such. Voluntary Action LeicesterShire took over all volunteer brokerage in Leicestershire from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009. They hold drop-in sessions for volunteers, so it is worth contacting them directly for information and advice. Their website address is [www.valonline.org.uk/](http://www.valonline.org.uk/).

Public libraries are also a fantastic source of information on many things, including volunteering.

Volunteering opportunities that are posted with participating volunteer centres as well as many other organisations from around England can be found on the 'Do-It' website ([www.do-it.org.uk/](http://www.do-it.org.uk/)). Launched in 2001, this is the first, and so far the only, national database of volunteering opportunities across the country. Many Leicestershire organisations advertise volunteering on this website.

You can also register to volunteer with a national charity called Timebank ([www.timebank.org.uk/](http://www.timebank.org.uk/)), an organisation geared up to creating new ways of volunteering and encouraging people who haven't done so before, to consider becoming a volunteer.

Reach ([www.reachskills.org.uk/](http://www.reachskills.org.uk/)) is another example of a volunteering charity, offering the facility of online registration.

Locally, the following organisations offer valuable information:

- Leicestershire County Council ([www.leics.gov.uk/index/community/volunteers.htm](http://www.leics.gov.uk/index/community/volunteers.htm)).
- Leicester-Shire and Rutland Sport (<http://www.lrsport.org/page.asp?section=0001000100350006&sectionTitle=Volunteering>).
- 'Vinvolved' is the new national volunteering programme for young people aged 16-25. There are two projects locally – one for Leicester and one for Leicestershire. Information can be found by clicking on [www.focus-charity.co.uk/vinvolved.html](http://www.focus-charity.co.uk/vinvolved.html) and [www.vasl.org.uk/vinvolved.html](http://www.vasl.org.uk/vinvolved.html).
- Voluntary Action LeicesterShire ([www.valonline.org.uk/](http://www.valonline.org.uk/)).
- Volunteering LeicesterShire ([www.volunteeringleicestershire.org.uk/](http://www.volunteeringleicestershire.org.uk/)).

We'd very much like to encourage people not only to consider volunteering in itself, but also to use volunteering as a means of developing new relationships, of increasing individual awareness and knowledge of the lives of others, and therefore of helping to promote good community cohesion.

## Credits and Sources of Further Information

Everyday Giving.com ([www.everydaygiving.com/volunteer.htm](http://www.everydaygiving.com/volunteer.htm))

Volunteer Centre Dacorum ([www.volunteerdacorum.org/10\\_good\\_reasons.htm](http://www.volunteerdacorum.org/10_good_reasons.htm))

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

Volunteering England On-line Information Sheets

(<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/resources/goodpracticebank/Information/>)

Volunteering LeicesterShire ([www.volunteeringleicestershire.org.uk/](http://www.volunteeringleicestershire.org.uk/))

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<sup>10</sup> They are almost always known as Volunteer Centres, though you may also come across the term 'Volunteer Bureau'. The Volunteering Leicestershire website has a list of these in Leicester Shire. For further details to go <http://www.volunteeringleicestershire.org.uk/leicestershire-volunteer-centres-network/>. Note that some of the details on here may have changed.