

## volunteers

# Adding value to volunteers

In England volunteering is in a period of unprecedented change. Since publication of the original Compact Volunteering Code of Good Practice in 2001, we have seen continued growth in the voluntary and community sector as a major service provider, in turn influencing both how we feel about volunteering and how we perceive its role in society. The citizenship agenda is also sharpening our understanding that volunteering includes both formal and informal volunteering, as well as campaigning and community activism.

Two critical developments are the direct engagement of government in volunteering, through central government policy and grants programmes, particularly ChangeUp, together with a maturing of the volunteering infrastructure. Recent investment in the Volunteering Hub is evidence that government at last understands what volunteering infrastructure is for and why it is necessary. In turn, the voluntary and community sector now has a clear strategy for developing the volunteering infrastructure over the next ten years, with redefined core functions; a commitment to both quality provision and modernisation; and a strategic approach locally, regionally and nationally.

The new code reflects these changes, as well as acknowledging the distinctiveness of the contribution of volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations. Through a series of undertakings by government and the voluntary and community sector, it makes the case for challenging barriers to volunteering; for explicit recognition of the contribution and value of volunteering; for high quality volunteering experiences; and for the necessary supporting infrastructure to be in place.

Central to the code are four principles underpinning our understanding of volunteering, without which it would be impossible to deliver on the undertakings. First, choice: volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual.

September saw the publication of a revised Compact Volunteering Code of Good Practice. Sir Christopher Spence explains why it was needed and what it means for volunteers



Freedom to volunteer equally implies freedom not to become involved. Second, diversity: volunteering should be open to all, no matter what background, race, colour, nationality, religion, ethnic or national origins, age, gender, marital status, sexual orientation or disability.

Third, mutual benefit: volunteers offer their contribution and skills unwaged, but they are entitled to benefit in other ways in return, not least by having a positive volunteering experience. Fourth, recognition: recognising and valuing the contribution of volunteers is fundamental to a fair relationship between volunteers, voluntary and community organisations and government.

In reflecting the new volunteering landscape the revised code is much clearer and more robust than its predecessor. For the first time it includes an unequivocal definition of volunteering as unpaid activity, with a commitment that consistency with this definition is closely monitored. This does not mean that a volunteer's contribution should go unrewarded or unrecognised. The code does not rule out incentivising volunteering per se, for example in offering appropriate training and skills development. But, while volunteers should never be out of pocket because of their voluntary activity, the code rules out monetary incentives.

Addressing the importance and scope

of volunteering, there is a much more comprehensive summary of the range of volunteering activities available. While this is not an exhaustive list, it paints a picture of volunteering as a powerful, multifaceted force for change, with volunteers involved in many different ways. This goes beyond the traditional perception of volunteers formally engaged in providing services, to include community activism and campaigning.

In the section on overcoming barriers to volunteering, the code challenges both parties to address physical, attitudinal and access barriers to volunteering. At a time when access to criminal records checks is becoming problematic, there is a joint commitment to free England-wide access to checks for volunteers.

Both parties recognise the need to ensure that there is a clearly identified specialist infrastructure offering high quality provision consistently across England, best delivered by a specialist volunteer development agency at local level. Importantly, the code contains a commitment by government to recognise the independence of infrastructure bodies and to 'adopt policies to help ensure that specialist volunteering infrastructure can develop realistic, sustainable, long-term funding'.

This revised code takes intelligent account of recent changes in the volunteering sector, setting out clear principles and undertakings for both sectors in working together to support and promote volunteering and voluntary action in England. If the code is to add value, it will need to be widely disseminated, understood and applied, and progress kept under continuous review.

**Christopher Spence MBE is chief executive of Volunteering England**