

2.1 General context

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This description concentrates on those opportunities directly funded and promoted by central government. It does not attempt to cover all volunteering opportunities. [Do-it.org](#), the national volunteering database, provides details of over one million volunteering opportunities.

Historical developments

Volunteering has a rich history in England, traceable back to medieval times when there was a strong association between religion and ministrations to the poor and sick. In more recent times, and particularly over the last half century or so, successive governments have sought to bring volunteering into the ambit of government policy. The changing relationship between government and volunteering was summarised in an [article](#) published in The Guardian newspaper in June 2015:

In the 1960s volunteering was seen as a way of diverting youthful energy away from Mods-and-Rockers gang feuds. In the 1970s the emphasis was on professionalising volunteer effort as a reliable appendage to social services. The Thatcher administration of the 1980s saw volunteering very much through a lens of individual freedom, and as a practical response to mass unemployment and inner-city unrest, while the mood music of the 1990s under both Tory [Conservative] and Labour regimes was heavy on active citizenship.

Previous initiatives

Since 2000, successive governments have introduced initiatives to promote and support voluntary activities for young people. The then Labour Government funded the [Millennium Volunteers \(MV\) programme](#). MV was designed to promote sustained volunteering amongst young people aged 16-24, especially amongst those who had no previous experience of volunteering and were at risk of social exclusion. It was based on the following

nine key principles:

- sustained personnel commitment
- community benefit
- voluntary participation
- inclusiveness
- ownership by young people
- variety
- partnership
- quality
- recognition.

MV certified participation by awarding a certificate after 100 hours of volunteering and an Award of Excellence and Personal Profile after 200 hours. The programme was based on a consultation paper, Millennium Volunteers: Labour's Proposals for citizen's service written in 1996.

In May 2004, still under a Labour Government, the Russell Commission was established to develop a new national framework for youth action and engagement. The Commission hoped that within five years its framework would deliver the following benefits:

- young people will develop their skills and contribute in an active way to their local communities
- the capacity of communities and of volunteering organisations will be enhanced
- society at large will be more cohesive, and through skills development the UK's competitive advantage will increase.

One of the key recommendations from the Russell Commission was the establishment of a dedicated implementation body which would be youth-led and independent of government. This led to creation of 'v, the national Young Volunteer Service' (now known as [vInspired](#)). It commissioned, through a series of contracts, the delivery of the framework as recommended by the Russell Commission. Between 2006 and 2011, it operated a grant-funding arm and worked directly with young people. Since 2011 and the end of most of its government funding, vInspired has continued its work with young people, providing them with opportunities to volunteer, but it no longer plays a grant making role.

The [Youth Community Action Programme](#) 2010 was a government initiative designed to encourage all young people in England aged 14-19 to take part in activities that contribute to their communities as part of their learning and personnel development. The aim was that all young people would have the chance to participate in at least 50 hours of community action by the age of 19. v, the National Young Volunteers Service, worked with the then education department (the Department for Children, Schools and Families) to implement the programme. The programme was cancelled by the Coalition Government (2010-15), before its full implementation, in the context of adverse economic conditions.

Main concepts

There is no single accepted UK definition for volunteering.

The Cabinet Office commissions the [Community Life Survey](#) to look at the latest trends in areas such as volunteering, charitable giving, local action and networks and well-being. The aim of the survey is to provide cost-effective data of value to government, external stakeholders and citizens. It uses the following definitions

of volunteering:

- formal volunteering – giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations
- informal volunteering – giving unpaid help as an individual to people who are not relatives.

[Compact Voice](#), an organisation which aims to foster strong, effective, partnerships between public bodies and voluntary organisations, has a number of good practice documents. Document number 31, which covers [volunteering](#), uses the following definition:

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 volunteering pages of the [National Council for Voluntary Organisations \(NCVO\)](#) website defines volunteering as

someone spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone who they're not closely related to. Volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual.

The 2010 Select Committee Report on [Services for Young People](#) describes some of the youth volunteering programmes introduced by successive governments (see the section above on 'historical developments' for details). Most of these programmes are driven by the objective to give young people an opportunity to volunteer in a way which will benefit their community.

The policy of successive governments to encourage social cohesion, and the underlying principles of action by individual citizens in response to community-level needs, have shaped both the National Citizen Service (NCS), the youth volunteering programme, and #iwill, the national campaign for youth social action (see the article on '[Youth Volunteering at National Level](#)' for further details).

It is worth noting that the [National curriculum](#) in schools (which sets out programmes of study for subjects that must be taught to all pupils aged 5 to 16) explicitly supports these policies by specifically mentioning volunteering. One of the aims of the [programme of study for citizenship](#) for 11- to-16-year-olds is to foster student 'interest in, and commitment to, participation in volunteering, as well as other forms of responsible activity, that they will take with them into adulthood'.