

Wales Council for Voluntary Action

Supporting charities, volunteers and communities

4. Volunteers

4.25 The language of volunteering - terms explained



The language that we use about volunteering can be confusing. Sometimes different terms are used interchangeably. Some terms have a very specific meaning, for example in the context of particular legislation. This is an attempt to explain some terms which are relevant to volunteering. They are listed in alphabetical order.

Community service: Is an activity carried out by a person or group for the benefit of a community. It may be voluntary- but is not always. People may be required to do community service as a part of a sentence for committing a crime or it may be a part of the school curriculum. In other circumstances people may have chosen to do community service, for example by joining a group or campaign.

Community service is a broad term that can mean different things in different contexts. See also [Community Work Placement](#) and [Community Participation](#).

Community Participation: This term applies to a particular element of the Welsh Baccalaureate. Pupils aged 14-19 complete a placement of 15-30 hours that aims to benefit the community to gain credit for their Welsh Baccalaureate qualification. This may also be referred to as a Community Challenge.

Community Work Placement

As a part of the welfare benefits system Community Work Placements (CWP) Are “aimed at those claimants whose primary barrier to work is a lack of work experience or motivation, and who may have spent a great deal of time away from a structured work environment. CWP aims to equip jobseekers with a valuable period of experience in a work-based environment, enabling them to develop the disciplines and skills associated with sustained employment, as well as to move them into employment.”

The programme is aimed at Job Seekers Allowance claimants who have completed the Work Programme and have been identified as potentially benefitting from this activity. Where this is agreed, it becomes a part of an individual’s claimant commitment and as such is a mandatory activity.

As they are mandatory, Community Work Placements do not fit with the widely accepted definition of volunteering.

Internship

There is no legal definition of internship. An internship is a structured, time bound opportunity with a defined start and end date. The aim of the Internship is to develop the individual's skills and knowledge whilst providing a meaningful experience to improve employability.

Internships may be paid, or unpaid. **Paid interns** are subject to minimum wage and employment legislation. **Unpaid interns** are regarded as voluntary Interns if:

- They are placed within a public or Third Sector organisation
 - There are flexible arrangements in place, with activity defined in an Internship description but no contractual obligations are in place
 - There is no financial reward or benefit other than legitimate expenses incurred
 - There is a support framework in place that is specific to the voluntary intern, including for example, an Internship policy, support and supervision structures and procedures for handling problems
- Voluntary interns would be regarded generally as [volunteers](#), although intern-specific policies are recommended.

Social Action

A definition of social action as agreed for the purpose of research relating to young people (Ockenden and Stuart 2014) is:

(Young people) taking practical action in the service of others in order to create positive social change that is of benefit to the wider community as well as to the (young) person themselves.

It is a form of volunteering, with emphasis on social change.

Timebanking

Timebanking involves giving time to some activity within the community, in return for 'credits' which can be redeemed for a range of benefits or 'rewards'. These rewards are defined by each timebanking scheme, each having an assigned credit value.

Timebanking schemes require administrative co-ordination, including maintaining individual credit records and promotion to include new members and partners. Some schemes receive external funding.

Beyond this, Timebanking schemes vary greatly with regard to the type of activity which can be undertaken to earn credits. Timebanks tend to refer to 'members' rather than 'volunteers'.

Timebanking activity may in some cases resemble volunteering activity, but since credits are 'earned' for time 'donated' it does not sit easily with the accepted definition of volunteering which involves activity for no financial gain.

Third Sector

The term is used by the Welsh Government as an inclusive and overarching description of a diverse range of organisations that share a set of values and characteristics. Third Sector organisations are:

- Independent, non-governmental bodies
- Established voluntarily by people who choose to organise themselves (i.e. governed by a voluntary Board of [Trustees](#))
- 'value driven' and motivated by social cultural or environmental objectives, rather than simply to make a profit
- For the benefit of people and communities in Wales

Trustee

Trustees are [volunteers](#). They have overall control of a voluntary organisation and are responsible for making sure that it does what it was set up to do. Trustees may be known by other titles including, Board members, Governors, Committee members. If the organisation they are running is a company, the trustees will also be Directors of the company

Whatever title they are given, trustees are the people who lead the organisation and decide how it is run.

Unpaid office holder

HMRC describes unpaid office holders as

- officials elected under the constitution of bodies such as sports clubs and social clubs and
- people who undertake unpaid work within normal commercial organisations, or within areas such as the health service, governing bodies of Further Education Colleges, or the courts.

Such office holders are not remunerated for their services, but may receive travelling and subsistence payments. In some cases they may be eligible for a financial loss allowance (to replace earnings which would otherwise have been gained). Members of public bodies, magistrates and jury members are paid for loss of earnings, for example.

Unpaid Office Holders are generally regarded as volunteers, and include office holders on governing bodies and Trustee Boards.

Unpaid work

Rochester (2006) depicts volunteering as three overlapping circles labelled 'unpaid work or service', 'activism' and 'serious leisure'. On this model, most volunteering within organisations would be regarded as 'unpaid work'.

The Department of Work and Pensions, however, understands unpaid work to be activity for which you might expect to be paid, but are not. The DWP booklet on volunteering (2010) states:

‘Choosing not to be paid is not the same as volunteering. If you’re doing what someone would normally be paid for (for example, if you’re working in a business or for a member of your family where they would usually pay someone to do the work) we will class this as unpaid work, not volunteering.

If you get Income Support, Jobseeker’s Allowance, income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit, we might decide that what you would have been paid are ‘notional earnings’. If we decide this, it may affect your benefits and tax credits.

We decide by looking at whether:

- someone would normally be paid to do the same kind of work
- your work helps society or your community in some way, and
- you work for a charity or similar group.’

Care is needed to avoid possible misinterpretation, if using the term ‘unpaid work’.

Voluntary experience

A general term, which usually places emphasis on the skills, personal development and other personal gains in the course of volunteering. This is valued for building a CV, or for personal benefits which will benefit one’s career.

Voluntary organisation

Originally the term was used to mean an organisation that was established independently of the state, to serve a public benefit. Nowadays we generally avoid the term in favour of [‘Third Sector’](#) in Wales.

Voluntary work

HMRC (Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs), refers to voluntary work in this way: ‘You’re classed as doing voluntary work if you can only get certain limited benefits (eg reasonable travel or lunch expenses) and you’re working for a:

- charity
- voluntary organisation or associated fund-raising body
- statutory body’

Given the need to clearly to distinguish, in many circumstances, what is ‘volunteering’ and what is ‘work’, this term is generally an unhelpful one. ‘Volunteering’ or ‘voluntary activity’ may suffice. It could, however, be used in relation to [‘voluntary worker’](#) (see below).

Voluntary worker:

This is a technical term that allows for exemption under the National Minimum Wage Act 1998. (NMW)

Full-time volunteers, such as those undertaking residential volunteering may fit into this category. The nature of the arrangements means that they work under a contract (written or implied), often being expected to fulfil prescribed hours and duties.

According to government guidance on the minimum wage:

‘Voluntary workers in your organisation are exempt from the NMW if both the following apply:

- you are a charity, voluntary organisation, associated fund-raising body or statutory body
- you give them no monetary payments and only limited and specified expenses and benefits’

Voluntary workers may commonly consider themselves to be volunteers, but are technically ‘workers’ under the law. They enjoy some rights which are denied to volunteers (although not as many as are afforded to employees). For example, they are covered by the Working Time Regulations (1998), and by the worker provisions of anti-discriminatory legislation.

Volunteer

A volunteer is someone who commits time and energy for the benefit of society and the community,* and can take many forms. It is undertaken freely and by choice, without concern for financial gain.

This is the definition recognised by Welsh Government, as in, for example, the Third Sector Scheme (January 2014)

A volunteer is not in a contractual position (whether written or implied). They can legitimately receive reimbursement for out of pocket expenses.

* we might add to this ‘or the environment’.

Volunteering (when on welfare benefits)

Individuals who receive welfare benefits can undertake volunteering by choice, providing that their JCP work coach is informed and that this activity does not jeopardise any of the pre-conditions which are associated with the benefit received – for example work search activities which have been agreed as part of a Claimant Contract.

In some cases, and if an individual chooses this, volunteering activity may be included as part of the Claimant Contract. In this case, specific volunteering activity has been recognised as playing a valuable part in developing the individual’s employability; a failure to undertake volunteering as agreed in this contract may result in benefit sanctions.

Volunteer Involving Organisation (VIO)

Any organisation that involves volunteers in its management and/or day to day work. If the only volunteers in an organisation are charity trustees then (unless they are volunteering for the organisation in additional capacities) the organisation would not be described as a volunteer involving organisation.

Volunteering opportunity

Specific vacancies for volunteers are described as volunteer (or volunteering) opportunities, as advertised on the volunteering opportunities website www.volunteering-wales.net. There is usually a role description describing the expectations, although often this is a matter for negotiation and can be adapted to suit individual requirements and circumstances.

Volunteering placement

The term is used when a referral agency, such a volunteer centre or a job centre, introduces a [volunteer](#) to a [volunteer opportunity](#) within an organisation. Volunteer placements are sometimes monitored for performance monitoring purposes.

Volunteer-led organisation

For the purpose of research carried out in 2008, the Institute of Volunteering Research defined a volunteer- led organisations as:

‘A volunteer-led group or organisation is a community group in which the ‘leader’ of the group is a volunteer who holds one of the ‘formally elected or appointed offices’. This is commonly, but not always, the chair. They are the functional equivalent of a chief executive officer in a paid organisation. This does not include [trustees](#) in paid-staff organisations.’

In some cases volunteer-led organisations employ paid staff, for example in administrative roles. The operational leadership of the organisation remains volunteer-led.

Work experience.

Work experience involves an opportunity for an individual to learn in the working environment; this may be by shadowing staff or trying out various tasks. It is generally a compulsory element of an educational course.

Schools students may undertake one or two weeks’ of work experience; students in tertiary education may undertake a longer period (this may be referred to as a **work placement, student placement, or practical experience**). Students on counselling courses, for example, are required to fulfil a requisite number of hours’ practical experience of counselling, alongside their academic studies.

Crucially any placement should provide a supported learning environment.

Students doing work experience as part of a higher or further education course are not entitled to the national minimum wage if the work experience is less than a year long.

Work experience is not generally regarded as volunteering, although sometimes it can lead into volunteering, when individuals choose to carry out activity which is over and above the requirements of their course/ educational institution.

Further Information:

Guidance from ACAS and from CIPD for employers, on Internships

www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=4701&q=internship

www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/internships-that-work_2013.pdf

NCVO [guidance on internships](#)

On the difference between volunteers and voluntary workers

www.business-scene.com/resources/national-minimum-wage-volunteers-voluntary-workers

Guidance on DWP Community Work Placements

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/314475/community-work-placements-provider-guidance.pdf

Ockenden and Stuart (2014) [Review of evidence on the outcomes of youth volunteering, social action and leadership](#). Institute for Volunteering research. NCVO

On Timebanking:

www.timebankingwales.org.uk/

On trustees:

www.gov.uk/charity-trustee-whats-involved

On unpaid Office holders

www.hmrc.gov.uk/manuals/eimanual/eim71100.htm

and on unpaid work

Rochester, Colin (2006) in [Making sense of Volunteering](#) – A literature review. Volunteering England.

Volunteering whilst getting benefits. JCP (2010) DWP:

www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/264508/dwp1023.pdf

[Volunteering to lead. A study of leadership within small volunteer-led groups](#). Research by the Institute of Volunteering Research (2008)

[Volunteers and the Law](#). Mark Restall (2005). Volunteering England

This includes a helpful section on the difference between 'worker' and 'employee'

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

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