

PRINCIPLES OF VOLUNTEERING

BY CATHERINE JOHNSTONE CBE



As we pass our 80th year at Royal Voluntary Service, there is an opportunity for us to pause and reflect on our origins, our history, the role of voluntary service in Britain and the significant and important part we have played in that. There is an opportunity, but also a need and we must focus our endeavours to meet the most challenging needs of the day.

THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT VOLUNTEERING IN BRITAIN NEEDS TO CHANGE.

To realise fully the potential of the gift of voluntary service, we must reframe volunteering and what it offers. The charity must again lead the way in helping the nation understand the power of volunteering to meet the needs of society, encouraging potential volunteers to step forward, and empowering and enabling organisations to welcome them.

To volunteer one's time is perhaps the most generous gift you can give: it is a gift of yourself. A gift of your time and your talent, but also a gift of humanity. For too long volunteering has been framed as a means to an end: a way of delivering a service to those in need or to cut costs of service provision. We have moved from the vision of our founder Lady Reading, and the core of voluntary service: as a way to stand alongside another human being, to make something better. It is by standing together, by supporting others, that we are able to experience the joy of volunteering. Joy derived from generosity and purpose, knowing that you are making an important contribution to the lives of others, to society, to Britain.



THE POTENTIAL FOR VOLUNTEERING TO POSITIVELY IMPACT SOCIETY IS ENORMOUS.

Like our founder, we at Royal Voluntary Service believe volunteers can do anything. For eighty years our volunteers, alongside volunteers across Britain, have proved that “all things are possible”. However, care must be taken to ensure volunteer effort is directed appropriately. We know, for example, the need in the NHS is high. We also know the NHS is a pressurised environment and the worst thing to do in a pressurised environment is to add more pressure.

WHAT OUR VOLUNTEERS OFFER

Care must be taken to ensure volunteering remains complementary and to win the hearts and minds of organisations and individuals to the cause, we need to work with them to help them understand the significant benefits volunteers can offer. Volunteering works best when it is focussed on meeting an identified need. It should help fill gaps and must avoid treading on toes. But it can also push the boundaries of what is possible, showing new ways to meet needs. Volunteers are able not only to offer support; they can also lead, manage, direct and show the way.

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SETTING THE STANDARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN VOLUNTARY SERVICE.

Successful volunteering, in its purest form, need not rely on or require the support of an organisation or complex management structures: neighbour helping neighbour has long been a successful model of informal volunteering and one that also continues to play an important role. People want to make a change and they want to be able to give their gift of voluntary service easily to benefit individuals and communities, as well as to bring connections and joy for themselves.

When organisations are involved in supporting volunteering though, care must be taken to ensure volunteers are thoughtfully placed and well supported.

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OUR SERVICES

Our goal at Royal Voluntary Service is for volunteers to have an experience that is healthy and happy and where they can make their best contribution. We know that more formal volunteering does not happen by accident: it needs planning, resources and on-going support, all of which involve cost. Our experience at Royal Voluntary Service means we are well placed to lead by example, demonstrating through our own practice how to do this well. We will continue to strive to set the standard for excellence in voluntary service.

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VOLUNTEERING HAS MADE SO MANY POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS IN EVERY AREA OF OUR SOCIETY, FROM SAVING LIVES AT SEA WITH THE RNLI, TO YOUTH FOOTBALL TEAM COACHES.


At Royal Voluntary Service we see the potential to make a positive impact in every area of society and we are intent on focusing our efforts over the next 5–10 years on supporting our NHS and the ageing population.

INSPIRING A NATION

We believe it is our responsibility at Royal Voluntary Service to help the nation understand that potential and to inspire people to step forward and play their part, whether as part of a Royal Voluntary Service project, with another organisation or simply by coming together in local communities. We are not going to achieve this societal change alone. Increasingly we will work in partnership and through referral, working collaboratively to grow the nation's network of volunteers and we need our charity partners to make volunteers as important as the communities and people they are supporting.

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We will also work to grow newer forms of volunteering, making it easier for people to play their part, including by volunteering online and through micro-volunteering, making short but impactful gifts of time. Only by doing this will we be able to meet the complex and changing needs of society. I believe we should play a much bigger role in celebrating the successes and achievements of volunteers. I want to make sure Royal Voluntary Service shout more frequently and more loudly about the joy of volunteering and the power of voluntary service. We have the opportunity and responsibility to do this.



I BELIEVE THE GIFT OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE IS ONE ANYONE CAN MAKE, AND EVERYONE SHOULD BELIEVE THEY HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO GIVE.

To achieve this, organisations will need to take a more flexible and creative approach to ensure volunteering is a whole life experience and that people can dip in and out of it.

GETTING STARTED

Our Winter Pressure programme is a great example of offering a “taster” of volunteering for those new to the experience. Opening up our Lunch Clubs and community centres to the children and grandchildren of volunteers has also enabled a broader range of people to give in support to others, bringing a new richness to those services. Organisations may also need to work harder at the early stages of the volunteer journey, focussing more effort on getting the best match between what a volunteer is able to give and where need is most acute. Volunteers must be confident there is space for their talent and creativity, for them to express something of themselves through their volunteering, rather than simply carrying out a prescribed and pre-designed role.

Central to this is recognising and building on the value of local knowledge and experience. Lady Reading spoke passionately about the value of local expertise and I continue to advocate for an approach that trusts volunteers, celebrates local initiative and works with communities to create the conditions for the best services: those owned and run by local people. Of course, we must take care to remain safe and legal, but too often in recent years fear and regulations have been allowed to stand in the way of trusting one person to act with kindness to help another.

THE GIFT OF VOLUNTARY SERVICE

Volunteering offers enormous value for the person making the gift, and to those receiving it: it changes lives, changes communities and changes society.

The sense of purpose and joy that can be derived from giving of yourself in support of others is incomparable. My vision is for everyone in Britain to see volunteering as a part of who they are, a part of how they choose to live their lives.

The need for more volunteers in society is in no doubt and the rewards are high. Our challenge is to work together to ensure everyone is aware of the opportunity and ready to step forward to take it.

This is the work of Royal Voluntary Service and the work I am proud to lead.



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