Volunteer: find a role that fits, then keep one slot a month

Volunteer

13 weeks · Mon, Nov 30 → Sun, Feb 28

Week by week

Tick a box each time you do a session.

Nov 30–Dec 6
Week 1

Work out what you can offer

Find your fit

- [ ] Decide how much time you can give. One slot of 2 to 4 hours a month is a good start. Pick when it falls, such as the first Saturday morning of the month or one weekday evening
  10 min
- [ ] Write down what you're good at and what you enjoy, from work, home, hobbies or the languages you speak. Add anything you'd rather not do in your free time
  15 min
- [ ] Choose three causes you care about, such as older people, children's reading, animals, parks and nature, food, health, refugees or your own street. The guide has ideas to match them to what you enjoy
  15 min
- [ ] Decide whether you'd like to help in person, from home, or either
  5 min

Done when: You've written down your monthly slot, three causes and at least two things you can offer

Sticking point: Feeling you have nothing to offer. Turning up when you said you would, being friendly and following instructions is most of what many roles need, and good places train you for the rest.

Dec 7–13
Week 2

Search, and make a shortlist of three

Find a place

- [ ] Search the national volunteering pages for your country, from the list in the guide, for roles near you or from home that match your causes
  30 min
- [ ] Look locally too: your local volunteer centre, library, council website and noticeboards, and places you already use, such as a school, park group, hospital or food bank
  20 min
- [ ] Write a shortlist of three roles, with what each involves, how much time it asks for, and whether it needs training or a background check
  15 min

Done when: You have a shortlist of three roles that could fit your monthly slot

Sticking point: Every role seems to want a weekly commitment. Ask anyway. Many places run monthly rotas, weekend shifts or regular events, and some will shape a role around the time you have.

Dec 14–20
Week 3

Ask your questions, then apply

Find a place

- [ ] Contact your top two places by email, phone or their website form. Ask the questions in the guide, especially what a session involves and whether once a month works
  20 min
- [ ] Apply for, or register your interest in, the role that fits best. Keep the second as a back-up
  30 min

Done when: You've applied for one role, and you know what happens next

Sticking point: No reply. Small groups are often run by volunteers in their spare time. Wait a week, follow up once, then move on to the next place on your shortlist.

Dec 21–27
Week 4

Induction, checks and a first date

Find a place

- [ ] Go to the welcome session, chat or training the organisation offers, and meet or speak to the person you'll report to
  1 hr
- [ ] If the role involves children or vulnerable adults, fill in the background check form with the organisation. The guide explains which check applies where you live
  20 min
- [ ] Agree a date for your first session and put it in your calendar, with how you'll get there and what to bring
  10 min
- [ ] Ask how to claim expenses such as travel, and start keeping your receipts
  5 min

Done when: Your first session is in your calendar

Sticking point: The checks or training will take a few weeks. Don't let the gap stop you: do a one-off in the meantime, such as a litter pick, a food bank shift or a community event, and start your regular role when the checks clear.

Dec 28–Jan 3
Week 5

Volunteer once

First time

- [ ] Your first session. Arrive 10 minutes early, find your contact, and ask who to go to with questions
  2 to 4 hr
- [ ] Afterwards, write down three things: what you did, what you enjoyed, and anything you weren't sure about
  10 min

Done when: You've volunteered once

Sticking point: Feeling awkward, or not much use, on the first day. That's normal. It often takes two or three sessions to learn the routine. Ask questions, and watch how others do it.

Jan 4–10
Week 6

Check it fits, and book month two

Look back

- [ ] Answer three questions: did you enjoy it, did your time feel well used, and did you feel welcome? Two yeses is a good sign
  10 min
- [ ] If it fits, tell your contact you'd like to come once a month, and book your next two dates. If it doesn't, thank them and contact the back-up place on your shortlist
  15 min
- [ ] Claim any expenses you're owed
  10 min

Done when: Your next session is booked, with this place or a new one

Sticking point: It wasn't what you expected. It's fine to stop and try somewhere else. Say so politely, and give some notice if you're already on a rota.

Jan 11–17
Week 7

Set your limits

Keep it steady

- [ ] Write down your limit, such as one session a month plus at most one extra if you want it, and keep it where you'll see it
  10 min
- [ ] Practise a short way to say no, such as "Thanks for asking. I can't this month, but I'll see you on the 6th."
  5 min
- [ ] Set a monthly reminder for a week before your slot, to confirm the date and plan your travel
  5 min

Done when: Your limit is written down, and your monthly reminder is set

Sticking point: Being asked to do more because you're reliable. You can say no without giving a reason. If the asks keep coming, tell your contact plainly what you can give.

Jan 18–24
Week 8

Get ready for month two

Keep it steady

- [ ] Confirm your date with your contact, and check whether anything has changed, such as the place, the time or what to bring
  5 min
- [ ] Do any short training the organisation has suggested, or read back through the notes from your first session
  30 min

Done when: Month two is confirmed, and you know what you'll be doing

Jan 25–31
Week 9

Volunteer for the second time

Month two

- [ ] Your second session. Learn the name of one other volunteer or member of staff, and ask them how they started
  2 to 4 hr
- [ ] Afterwards, add a line to your notes: what felt easier than last time
  5 min

Done when: You've volunteered two months running

Sticking point: Not wanting to go on the day. If you can, go anyway: the reluctance often fades once you're there. If it's the role itself you dread, deal with that next week.

Feb 1–7
Week 10

Review, and book month three

Look back

- [ ] Read your notes. If something isn't working, such as the time, the task or the journey, ask your contact whether it can change
  15 min
- [ ] Book your next three monthly dates
  10 min
- [ ] Claim any expenses you're owed
  5 min

Done when: Your next three dates are in your calendar

Sticking point: The role is growing into more than you agreed to. Ask to go back to what you were first offered, or to a smaller part of it. You're a volunteer, not staff.

Feb 8–14
Week 11

Look after yourself

Keep it steady

- [ ] Check how sessions leave you. Tired but glad is fine. Drained, anxious or upset after more than one session is a sign to talk to your contact or change role
  10 min
- [ ] If the role brings hard moments, such as illness, grief or distress, ask what support the organisation gives its volunteers, and write down who to talk to
  10 min
- [ ] If a coming month will be hard to get to in person, pick one way to help from home that month instead. The guide has ideas
  15 min

Done when: You've checked how volunteering is leaving you, and written down who to talk to if a session is hard

Feb 15–21
Week 12

Get ready for month three

Keep it steady

- [ ] Confirm your date with your contact, and plan your journey
  5 min
- [ ] Tell a friend or someone at home when your monthly slot is, so someone asks you how it went
  5 min

Done when: Month three is confirmed, and someone else knows your slot

Feb 22–28
Week 13

Volunteer for the third month

Month three

- [ ] Your third session
  2 to 4 hr
- [ ] Afterwards, check that months four, five and six are in your calendar, and keep your monthly reminder going
  10 min

Done when: You've volunteered once a month for three months, and months four to six are booked

Sticking point: Wondering whether to take on more. Wait until month six. If you still want more then, add one thing at a time.

Milestones

Sun, Dec 27	Find a place that needs help
Sun, Jan 3	Volunteer once
Sun, Feb 28	Once a month for three months
Sun, May 30	Once a month for six months

How the plan works

To start volunteering, work out what you can give, find one place that needs it, and book a regular slot. The plan follows the four steps on your goal board: find a place that needs help, volunteer once, then once a month for three months, and once a month for six months.

First you find your fit. You decide how much time you have, what you're good at and which causes you care about. Then you search, make a shortlist of three roles, ask each a few questions and apply for the best one. Some roles need training or a background check first, so this part can take a few weeks.

Then you go once, and look back. If the place fits, you book a monthly slot, such as the first Saturday morning of the month, for 2 to 4 hours. If it doesn't, you try the next place on your list. Most weeks between sessions need 10 to 30 minutes: confirming the date, claiming expenses and checking the role still suits you.

Why it's worth it. The NHS lists helping other people, including volunteering in your local community, as one of its 5 steps to mental wellbeing. A large review led by the University of Exeter Medical School found that volunteers reported lower levels of depression, more life satisfaction and better wellbeing, though the researchers say this is a link, and more work is needed to show that volunteering is the cause. In a survey of

volunteers in Great Britain by NCVO, the national body for volunteering in England, three in four said volunteering improves their mental health and wellbeing.

The milestones count from the first day of week 1: you find a place by about day 28 and volunteer once by about day 35 (sooner if you've volunteered before), reach three months of monthly sessions by about day 91, and six months by about day 182. After the last week there are no new tasks: you keep your monthly slot going.

Which level to pick

- I've never volunteered: you haven't volunteered, or not since school, and you don't know where you'd go. You search and apply in weeks 1 to 4, volunteer for the first time in week 5, and do your third monthly session in week 13.
- I've volunteered before: you've helped somewhere before, or you already know the place you want to help, and they can take you within a week or two. Your first session is in week 2, and your third in week 10.

If you're not sure, pick the first level. The extra weeks give you time to find a role that fits, which makes it far easier to keep going.

Your monthly slot won't always land exactly four weeks apart. If your slot is a fixed date, such as the first Saturday, move the session weeks to match it and fit the weeks in between around them.

What you can offer, and matching causes to what you enjoy

Time. You don't need much. One regular slot a month is enough to be useful and to keep, and it's easier to add more later than to cut back.

Skills. Think about work, home and hobbies. Organising, cooking, driving, gardening, fixing things, writing, numbers, listening, teaching, a second language or knowing your area well are all wanted somewhere. Some people like to use their work skills, such as accounts, law or IT. Others want a complete change from their job. Both are fine.

Match the cause to what you enjoy doing, not only to what you care about. Caring about a cause gets you started. Enjoying the task keeps you going. A few pairings to spark ideas:

- You like people and chatting: befriending an older person, welcoming visitors at a museum or hospital, helping at a community café or lunch club.
- You like being outdoors: conservation days, park and canal groups, community gardens, litter picks, footpath work.
- You like order and calm: sorting donations, food bank stock, charity shop rotas, archive and library work.
- You like helping someone learn: reading with children, conversation practice for people learning your language, mentoring, helping someone get online.
- You like animals: animal rescue centres, dog walking for owners who can't, wildlife surveys.
- You like to make things: knitting or sewing for hospitals and shelters, repairing things at a community repair session, making props or sets for a local theatre.
- You like a buzz: stewarding events, fun runs and festivals, which often need people for one day at a time.

Volunteering Australia's national standards say volunteer roles should be designed and negotiated with volunteers, considering their needs and interests. Good organisations everywhere work this way, so say what you'd like to do and what you'd rather not.

Where to find a role, by country

Start with your country's national volunteering pages, then look locally. Local is where most regular roles are.

UK. GOV.UK's volunteering pages list places to search, including NCVO, NAVCA (the network of local volunteer centres and community support organisations), NHS Volunteering, Reach Volunteering for skilled roles such as accounts, law, marketing or IT, and Volunteering Matters for young, older and disabled volunteers. In Scotland, look at Volunteer Scotland, and in Wales, Volunteering Wales. In Northern Ireland, Volunteer Now is the national volunteering charity. Your local volunteer centre can talk you through roles near you.

US. AmeriCorps, the federal agency for national service and volunteering, has a volunteer search on its website. If you're 55 or over, AmeriCorps Seniors matches older adults with local roles. Many states have a volunteer or service commission with its own listings, and volunteer.gov lists roles in national parks, forests and other public lands. Your public library and city or county website often list local groups too.

Canada. Volunteer Canada is the national charity for volunteering, and many towns and cities have a local volunteer centre that matches people with roles. Your municipality's website and public library are good places to look.

Australia. Volunteering Australia is the national body, and each state and territory has its own volunteering peak body, such as Volunteering Queensland or Volunteering Tasmania, which list roles and can point you to a local volunteer resource centre. Your local council often lists community groups.

Elsewhere. Search for "volunteer centre" and the name of your town, ask at your town hall, council or library, or look for your country's national volunteering body. UN Volunteers, part of the United Nations, runs an online volunteering service with remote roles for charities and public bodies around the world.

Wherever you live, the places you already use are worth asking: a school, library, hospital, place of worship, sports club, food bank or residents' group. Many small groups never advertise.

Questions to ask an organisation

Asking before you start saves you from a role that doesn't fit. A good place is happy to answer.

- What would I do on a typical session, and who would I be working with?
- How much time does the role need, and can I come once a month?
- Who is my contact if I have a question or a problem?
- What training do you give, and is it in person or online?
- Does the role need a background check? Who arranges it, and how long does it take?
- Which expenses do you pay, such as travel or lunch, and how do I claim them?
- Am I covered by your insurance while I volunteer?
- Is there a role description or volunteer agreement I can read?
- What happens if I need a break, or want to stop?

If the answers are vague, or you're asked to commit to more than you offered before you've even started, try the next place on your list.

Background checks for work with children or vulnerable adults

Roles with children or vulnerable adults, such as reading with pupils, befriending older people or helping in a care home, usually need a criminal record check before you start. The organisation tells you which check it needs and helps you apply.

- England and Wales: a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. GOV.UK says you might need one if you want to volunteer with children or vulnerable adults.
- Scotland: the PVG scheme, run by Disclosure Scotland.
- Northern Ireland: an AccessNI check.
- Canada: a police check that includes a vulnerable sector check, from your local police.

▪ Australia: a Working with Children Check for roles with children, run by each state and territory, and sometimes a national police check.

▪ US: the organisation runs a background check, often with fingerprints for work with children.

Checks can take a few weeks. Apply as soon as you're offered the role, and do a one-off somewhere in the meantime.

Having a criminal record doesn't rule you out. GOV.UK says that if you have a criminal record you can still volunteer in most roles, depending on your offences. Be honest on the form, and ask the organisation if you're unsure.

Your rights as a volunteer

You're not paid, but you shouldn't be out of pocket. GOV.UK says you're not paid for your time as a volunteer, but you may get money to cover expenses, usually food, drink, travel or any equipment you need to buy. Ask which expenses the place pays before you start, keep your receipts and claim them each month. In the UK, you can usually volunteer while claiming benefits, as long as the only money you get covers expenses and you still meet the benefit's conditions.

You choose how much you give. In NCVO's survey, the most common worries volunteers had were that volunteering can take up too much time, and feeling pressured to do more than they'd like or to keep going. You're allowed to say no to extra shifts, to ask for a smaller role, to take a break, and to stop. Give notice if you're on a rota, but you don't owe anyone a reason.

You should be safe and supported. You should know who your contact is, get the training the role needs, and never be asked to do something you feel unsafe doing. If something feels wrong, tell your contact or someone more senior. If the role keeps sliding into unpaid staff work, with set hours, targets or a promise of a job later, ask about it.

Volunteering from home

If getting out is hard, or a month is too busy to travel, you can help from home. NCVO found that people who volunteer only by phone or online were as satisfied as those who volunteer only in person.

Ideas to ask about:

▪ Phone or video befriending: a regular call with an older or isolated person.

▪ Skills for a small charity: bookkeeping, writing funding bids, keeping a website or newsletter up to date, design or translation.

▪ Mentoring or tutoring online, through a school, college or charity.

▪ Making things: knitting, sewing or cards for hospitals, shelters and care homes. Check what's wanted before you start.

▪ Online projects run by museums, archives, libraries and universities, such as transcribing old records or counting wildlife in photos.

▪ Writing letters to people who are lonely, in hospital or serving overseas, through a charity that runs it safely.

The same rules apply: work through a real organisation, know who your contact is, and keep to your monthly slot.

Avoid paid volunteering trips

Some schemes charge you to volunteer abroad for a week or two, often with children. They can look like a good place to start. This plan leaves them out.

GOV.UK's advice on volunteering overseas warns that some organisations that invite volunteers are profit-oriented, not charitable, and that a regular turnover of volunteers without relevant training and experience can be harmful to children's development and emotional wellbeing. It also says that visiting or volunteering in orphanages can have serious unintended consequences for vulnerable children.

The help most groups need is close to home, from someone who comes back each month. If you do want to volunteer abroad one day, a few months of regular volunteering near you is the best preparation, and you can look for an established charity that doesn't place short-term volunteers with children.

Avoiding burnout, and common mistakes

Volunteering is meant to leave you glad you went. The Exeter review noted that if you volunteer too much, the habit can become a burden, with problems of its own.

- Saying yes to everything. Keep your limit written down, and say no to extras that push you over it.
- Starting too big. A weekly role on top of a full week is hard to keep. Start with one slot a month.
- Choosing a cause you care about but a task you dislike. Match the task to what you enjoy.
- Taking on emotionally heavy roles without support. Roles with illness, grief or crisis need training and someone to talk to afterwards. Ask what's offered.
- Waiting for the perfect role. A good-enough role you go to every month beats a perfect one you never start.
- Not claiming expenses. If it costs you money each month, it gets harder to keep going.
- Staying in a role that isn't working. Talk to your contact, change role, or move on. Leaving one place isn't giving up on volunteering.

If volunteering starts to make you feel low, anxious or exhausted, take a break and tell your contact. If those feelings stay with you, talk to your doctor.

Keeping your monthly slot to six months

After the last week there are no new tasks. Each month, repeat the same small steps:

- A week before your slot: confirm the date with your contact and plan your journey.
- On the day: go, and learn one new thing or one new name.
- The week after: claim expenses, write a line in your notes, and check the next date is in your calendar.
- Every three months: book the next three dates, and ask yourself whether the role still fits.

A fixed slot, such as the first Saturday morning of the month, means you don't have to decide each time. The US Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion notes that, for older adults, a regular, commitment-based activity built around shared interests helps people feel they belong, more than an occasional one-off.

If a month falls through, ask for another date in the next couple of weeks, or help from home that month. If it can't be moved, count the next one. Six months is the goal, not six perfect months. Volunteering is also a good way to meet people: the Make a new friend plan has more on turning familiar faces into friends.

If you fall behind

Missed 1 week: Carry on with the current week. If it was a session week, ask your contact for another date in the next week or two, and tell them as soon as you know you can't make it.

Missed 2 weeks: If you were still searching, go back to your shortlist and contact the next place this week. If you missed a session, book the next date now, then pick up at the "Get ready" week before it.

Missed 4 weeks: A month has gone by. Don't try to do two sessions to catch up. Get in touch with your contact, say you'd like to carry on, book the next date, and pick up at the week before your next session.

Missed 8 or more weeks: Start again at week 1 of "I've volunteered before", with the same place or a new one, and keep your slot small. The sessions you've already done still count towards your milestones.

Sources

NHS
https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/
“Evidence suggests there are 5 steps you can take to improve your mental health and wellbeing.”

NHS
https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/five-steps-to-mental-wellbeing/
“It could be small acts of kindness towards other people, or larger ones like volunteering in your local community.”

University of Exeter
https://news-archive.exeter.ac.uk/2013/august/title_315358_en.html
“Volunteers also reported lower levels of depression, increased life satisfaction and enhanced well-being, although the findings have yet to be confirmed in trials.”

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https://news-archive.exeter.ac.uk/2013/august/title_315358_en.html
“Our systematic review shows that volunteering is associated with improvements in mental health, but more work is needed to establish whether volunteering is actually the cause.”

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https://news-archive.exeter.ac.uk/2013/august/title_315358_en.html
“Volunteer too much, and the habit can become a burden, bringing problems of its own.”

NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations)
https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/time-well-spent-2023/volunteer-experience-impact/
“Three-quarters of recent volunteers (75%) say volunteering improves their mental health and wellbeing.”

NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations)
https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/time-well-spent-2023/volunteer-experience-impact/
“When asked directly about the negative effects of volunteering, volunteers’ most common concerns were that volunteering can take up too much time (13%) and that volunteers feel pressured to do more than they would like or to continue their involvement (10%).”

NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations)
https://www.ncvo.org.uk/news-and-insights/news-index/time-well-spent-2023/volunteer-experience-impact/
“Satisfaction rates in 2023 are equal among people who volunteer exclusively by phone or online and those who volunteer exclusively in person (both 92% satisfied).”

GOV.UK
https://www.gov.uk/volunteering/when-you-can-volunteer
“If you have a criminal record you can still volunteer in most roles, depending on your offences.”

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“You might need a Disclosure and Barring Service check if you want to volunteer with children or vulnerable adults.”

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“You are not paid for your time as a volunteer, but you may get money to cover expenses.”

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https://www.gov.uk/volunteering/pay-and-expenses
“This is usually limited to food, drink, travel or any equipment you need to buy.”

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https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safer-adventure-travel-and-volunteering-overseas
“Some organisations that invite volunteers are profit-oriented, not charitable.”

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“This can have serious unintended consequences for vulnerable children and communities.”

Volunteering Australia
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“Volunteer roles are designed and negotiated with volunteers, considering the needs and interests of volunteers.”

Volunteering Australia
https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/get-involved/resources/nationalstandards/
“We invite all organisations and groups to implement the National Standards with the guidance of their state and territory Volunteering Peak Body.”

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, US Department of Health and Human Services
https://odphp.health.gov/news/202408/connection-key-aging-well
“While the occasional, “one off” volunteer activity may feel good or inspire a spirit of goodwill, we’ve found that offering a regular, commitment-based activity centered on shared interests helps older adults feel that they belong.”

Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, US Department of Health and Human Services
https://odphp.health.gov/news/202408/connection-key-aging-well
“AmeriCorps Seniors is the grant making office in the agency that focuses on engaging adults 55 years and older in national service and volunteer opportunities.”

This plan online	https://goaltodo.com/volunteer-regularly
Reach it with others on Welang	https://welang.com/goals/volunteer-regularly
Reach it on your own in HourLife	https://www.hourlife.com