

## Lend a hand: volunteer to improve society – and your life

The Telegraph's volunteering campaign is up and running. Former newscaster Martyn Lewis explains how you can make a difference



Community service: Martyn Lewis, as chairman of the National Council of Voluntary Organisations, believes there are no excuses for non-involvement Photo: Rebecca Fennell

By Martyn Lewis

7:00AM GMT 25 Jan 2014

The closest I came to “doing my bit” for charity during the first 15 years of my working life was popping a few coins in a collecting box outside Marks & Spencer. Being on the road as an ITN reporter left little time for anything else. All that changed, though, with an out-of-the-blue request

for me to volunteer my time and what film-making talent I had to create the first promotional video for the (then) new charity Help The Hospices.

That triggered a series of reports on News At Ten – the first time that hospices had ever featured on national television news in Britain. Other charities then reached out, and I found myself in a world of truly amazing people, among them thousands of volunteers whose dedication and attitude to life was a welcome antidote to the perfectly proper scepticism — and the sometimes less proper cynicism — of my chosen profession.

Thirty years on, one of my current volunteering roles as chairman of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations has given me a helicopter view of the volunteering landscape. It is an awesome sight.

Volunteers are estimated to contribute the equivalent of £42 billion to the British economy – more than the defence budget. One in three adults gives time and effort to their chosen cause at least once a month. Of the 162,000 charities in Britain, more than 110,000 are run solely by volunteers. These are people of passion and commitment, who represent, for me, the closest our country gets to real democracy. That is because they have identified a problem or a need in their community, and cajoled friends and neighbours into doing something about it. The organisations they create provide our elected representatives with a key early-warning system for issues emerging at the grassroots of society, and an extra means of monitoring those already on the political radar.

The story of this social army is one of repeated triumph over adversity, evident not only in the high-profile Pride of Britain Awards, Children in Need and Comic Relief, but also in a range of initiatives I have come to know and admire: the Beacon Awards; the UK Community Foundations; the Lord Mayor of London's Dragon Awards and, top of the tree, the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, part of the honours system and the equivalent of an MBE.

Think of a need – any need – and volunteers are there trying to address it. Age UK has 100,000, and a similar number help to organise half a million Scouts. The Samaritans have 20,000 volunteers, while each of Britain's 250 hospices has several hundred. Macmillan Cancer Support can call on a force of 10,000, and 300,000 young people a year volunteer as part of their Duke of Edinburgh's Award. YouthNet, which offers 16 to 25-year-olds online help and advice, trains young volunteers to mentor their peers.

Politicians know that “practical action in the service of others” is to be encouraged as an instinctive part of a civilised society. Hence the recent coming together of the three main party leaders to support the Prince of Wales's “Step Up To Serve” initiative, which aims to help 1.7 million more

of Britain's young people aged 10 to 20 make volunteering a lifetime habit.

Thanks to the internet, the old excuses for not volunteering — “I haven't time” or “I can't find the right opportunity” — don't wash any more. Opportunities drop daily into Britain's 250 volunteer centres' databases. And the website do-it.org lists around a million opportunities that are quick and easy to access.

A growing number of groups are offering the chance to dip into volunteering on an occasional one-off basis. This “micro-volunteering”, as it is known, might include working from your home computer to help your favourite cause. The “Help From Home” online platform lists more than 800 such activities.

Indeed, Employer Supported Volunteering (ESV) is really lifting off, not just because it is a good investment in the community, but because it benefits companies too. Latest research shows it attracts and retains staff, increases morale, reduces sick leave, develops skills, boosts the corporate reputation, and even sees more product sales. It is not surprising then that more than a third of all employees in Britain now work for a company with a volunteering scheme of some sort.

But what if you don't have a job at the moment? Volunteering while out of work is just as important. It sends a positive message to a potential employer. Evidence from the CBI shows that helping others develops optimism, determination and emotional intelligence — skills that open the door to employability. An NCVO project, “Volunteering for Stronger Communities”, funded by the Big Lottery, has been working for two years with 15 volunteer centres to help those furthest away from the labour market to get back into work through volunteering. And, when in a job, your volunteering track record could help you get promoted – as it does with companies such as BP.

If you are among the ranks of the retired, volunteering keeps you engaged and active, combating loneliness and delivering for many people a much longer life.

Everyone seems to agree that volunteering changes you as a person, and the most dramatic proof of that can be found in Leeds prison. Thanks to a project funded by the innovation charity, Nesta, and coordinated by NCVO, Leeds Volunteer Centre opened a branch inside the jail. It works with prisoners to set up volunteering opportunities for when they are freed. Of the 54 who embraced volunteering on release last year, none has reoffended. That compares to usual reoffending rates as high as 78 per cent.

If you think, as I do, that too much of news coverage is overwhelmingly negative, concentrating solely on the world's problems, then regard the work of volunteers as picking up where the news stories end, by attempting to address those problems and, more importantly, deliver solutions.

It used to be that if you were a volunteer, some people would attach a “holier than thou” label to you – almost as if you weren't part of the “real” world. Those days are over. There is a growing recognition that volunteering is the backbone of society. It is no accident that The Daily Telegraph, with its Lend A Hand campaign, has become the first national newspaper in Britain to go further than the usual Christmas or disaster appeals and commit to regular coverage across the year of the achievements and aspirations of millions of volunteers.

But a note of caution – it is not entirely cost-free. The Institute for Volunteering Research reckons that for every pound invested in volunteers an organisation reaps benefits worth £8 to £10. The challenge in austerity is to continue to unlock that £1 of investment.

My ambition is to live in a country where almost everyone wakes up on a Sunday and asks: “What did I do for my community last week – and what am I going to do for them next week?” We are well on the way.

### **Getting started with volunteering**

Volunteering England, now part of NCVO, provides guidance on how to find a volunteering opportunity, details of the location of volunteer centres, and useful information on projects including Volunteering for Stronger Communities, at [volunteering.org.uk](http://volunteering.org.uk).

Do-It ([do-it.org.uk](http://do-it.org.uk)) is the national database of volunteering opportunities. Search through around a million by interest, activity and location.

[vinspired.org](http://vinspired.org) specialises in helping young people volunteer in ways that matter to them.

Check out advertising and appeals for help in village halls, libraries or the local press.

Find out about micro-volunteering at [helpfromhome.org](http://helpfromhome.org).

For Employer Supported Volunteering: [volunteering.org.uk/resources/esv-resource-hub](http://volunteering.org.uk/resources/esv-resource-hub).

Prince of Wales's volunteer initiative: [stepuptoserve.org.uk](http://stepuptoserve.org.uk).

Youthnet trains young volunteers to mentor their peers: [youthnet.org](http://youthnet.org).

To nominate a group for the Queen's Award: [gov.uk/queens-award-for-voluntary-service](http://gov.uk/queens-award-for-voluntary-service).

*Martyn Lewis CBE is chairman of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service Awards Committee and YouthNet*

**Read more:** Boris Johnson launches Telegraph Year of the Volunteer campaign

**Read more:** Boris Johnson: volunteer and make a difference

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2014