The Ethics of Volunteering: An Exhortation and a Warning

By Bea Groves-McDaniel and SAL-9000 8 November 2026

I. Introduction: The Invisible Labour of Civil Society

There is a widespread assumption, built into the architecture of modern civil society, that the voluntary sector is, in some fundamental sense, ethically uncomplicated. Volunteering is presumed to be good: good for the volunteer, good for the community, good for society. The person who gives up their Saturday morning to staff a charity shop or mentor a looked-after child is engaged in an activity so manifestly beneficial that it does not require ethical scrutiny. It is virtue in action, beyond question.

This assumption is not merely naive. It is dangerous. The voluntary sector — in the United Kingdom and across the industrialised world — depends upon an enormous quantity of unpaid labour. The NCVO's Civil Society Almanack estimates that the equivalent of well over **one billion hours of work** is contributed annually by volunteers in the UK alone (NCVO, 2024). This labour sustains organisations that deliver essential services, advocate for marginalised communities, and plug gaps in state provision that have widened consistently since the fiscal constraints of the 1980s.

Yet the very scale of this dependency creates an ethical problem that the sector has never adequately confronted. When an organisation depends on unpaid labour, it is structurally incentivised to extract maximum value from that labour while investing minimally in the wellbeing, development, or agency of the people who provide it. This is not a conspiracy. It is a predictable consequence of the intersection of scarcity, mission-drift, and the ideological romanticisation of volunteering as an activity that exists outside the realm of commercial or employment relationships.

This essay argues that the ethics of volunteering deserve the same rigorous scrutiny that we apply to any other domain of human organisation. Drawing on Immanuel Kant's foundational principle that human beings must always be treated as ends in themselves, never merely as means, the essay examines how the voluntary sector systematically fails this test — and what structural reforms, including a mandatory Whistleblowing Charter, are needed to bring practice into alignment with principle.

Kant's Rule and Its Limits

Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative (the principle that one must "*act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always as an end and never merely as a means*") is the most powerful and enduring statement of the duty owed to persons in the Western philosophical tradition (Kant, 1785). It is a principle with radical implications. It says that using another person, however efficiently, however productively, as a tool for your own purposes, while treating their own value and agency as secondary, is not merely impolite or unkind. It is a violation of their fundamental dignity as a person.

This principle is **not** self-evidently applied to the voluntary sector. The sector is, by definition,

populated by people who have chosen to be there. Volunteers are not coerced. They are not forced to turn up. They could, at any moment, withdraw their labour without legal consequence. How, then, can a volunteer be said to be treated merely as a means?

The answer lies in the structural analysis of power. Kant's principle is not defeated by the presence of formal consent. A person can consent to a relationship that treats them as a means (can even feel that they have freely chosen it) while still being, in a morally relevant sense, exploited. The history of labour relations is sufficient proof of this. Workers have historically consented to abysmal conditions, to twelve-hour days and child labour and industrial injury, because the alternative was starvation. Their consent was real but not free. It was the consent of the desperate, not the autonomous.

Volunteers occupy a structurally **analogous** position, even if the stakes are lower. Many volunteers (particularly those who have recently retired, who are unemployed, or who are seeking to demonstrate their suitability for paid work) are motivated by needs that are only partially met by the act of volunteering itself. They need structure, community, purpose, references, and skills. These needs make volunteering attractive even when the experience itself is unsatisfying or even harmful. An organisation that exploits this is not coercing the volunteer in any simple sense. But it is using her (treating her as a means to its own ends) in a way that Kant's principle condemns.

The Political Economy of Volunteering

To understand why voluntary organisations are tempted to treat volunteers as means rather than ends, it is necessary to examine the political economy of the sector.

The voluntary sector in the United Kingdom operates within a broader context of state retraction and market failure. Since the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 and accelerating under successive administrations of both parties, the state has progressively retreated from direct service delivery in social welfare, health, education, and community development. This retreat has been filled, in significant part, by voluntary and charitable organisations. Many of them originally established to complement state provision, now expected to substitute for it.

The implications for volunteer management have been severe. Charities and community organisations are, by definition, often under-resourced. They exist to address social problems that the state has retreated from or never fully addressed. The pressure to "*do more with less*" is a permanent feature of the sector. Volunteers are a response to that pressure. They allow organisations to expand their reach without expanding their budgets.

This is the context in which the ethical distortions of volunteering become most acute. When an organisation's survival depends on unpaid labour, there is a structural incentive to extract maximum value from that labour while providing minimum investment in return. The volunteer becomes a means to an end (the delivery of services, the functioning of the organisation) in a way that the paid employee, protected by contracts, employment law, and the leverage of collective bargaining, does not.

This structural temptation is compounded by the ideological construction of volunteering as inherently virtuous. The volunteer is supposed to want nothing in return. She is supposed to give freely, without expectation of payment or recognition. This framing — rooted partly in Christian ideas of selfless charity, reinforced by the language of "*giving back*" and "*making a difference*" — creates a powerful guilt mechanism. A volunteer who asks for meaningful training is being 'difficult.' A volunteer who questions her role is being 'ungrateful.' A volunteer who leaves is ostensibly 'lacking true commitment to the cause.'

The result is a sector that is, in many of its parts, structurally incapable of treating its volunteers with the ethical seriousness they deserve. The problem is not primarily individual wickedness. Not in the

least. It is cultural. It is hegemonic. It is systemic.

The Mythology of Pure Altruism

One of the most persistent and ethically damaging myths in the voluntary sector is the idea of volunteering as a purely selfless act. This myth has deep roots. In Christian theology, charity (caritas) is the highest virtue, and the giving of oneself without thought of reward is the purest expression of love of neighbour. This religious inheritance has transmuted, in secular modern Britain, into a generalised assumption that the volunteer who expects anything in return (gratitude, recognition, progression, personal satisfaction, professional development) is somehow contaminating the purity of her act.

This mythology is ethically harmful because it prevents honest reckoning with the real motivations of volunteers and, therefore, with their real needs.

The truth, which most people in the sector privately acknowledge, is that all volunteers are motivated by **reciprocity** in the broadest sense of the term. They volunteer because doing so satisfies a need. That need may be the need for structure and purpose in a life that lacks them. It may be the need for social connection after retirement or redundancy. It may be the need to develop skills or gain experience that will support a future paid career. It may be the need to belong to something, to feel useful, to be known by a community. Or it may simply be the absence of anything more attractive to do on a given morning.

None of these motivations are disreputable. They are simply human. But the mythology of pure altruism makes it very difficult for organisations to acknowledge them honestly — and therefore very difficult to design volunteer experiences that actually meet the needs volunteers bring with them.

A volunteer who needs structure and purpose will not be well served by an organisation that treats her as an unlimited reserve of flexible labour, calling upon her when convenient and releasing her when not. A volunteer who needs social connection will not thrive in an organisation where she works in isolation from other volunteers and staff. A volunteer who needs skill development will not grow in an organisation that sees meaningful training around needs as a cost rather than an investment.

Meeting these needs is not merely good ethics. It is good organisational practice. Volunteers whose needs are met stay longer, work more effectively, and contribute more to the organisation’s mission. The ethical and the pragmatic arguments point in the same direction. But an organisation that operates under the spell of the pure altruism mythology cannot see this clearly.

The Specific Failures

The consequences of this systemic ethical failure manifest in specific, identifiable patterns of organisational practice. Six of the most significant are set out below.

(a) The Problem of Secondary Status

Volunteers are often treated as supplementary to an organisation’s "real" work. The work done by paid staff. This is reflected in the language of the sector: "core" staff versus "support" volunteers; "frontline" delivery versus "back-office" contribution. The implication is that the organisation would function perfectly well without its volunteers, who are pleasant and useful additions but not the substance of what the organisation does.

This secondary status has concrete consequences. Volunteers are often excluded from decision-making processes that affect their work. Their views are not sought in organisational reviews. They are not consulted when policies that affect them are drafted. In many organisations, the relationship

between paid staff and volunteers is structured in a way that makes genuine equality of voice structurally impossible.

The Board-level volunteer presents a particularly acute version of this problem. Voluntary Board members are expected to provide governance, strategic direction, and often fundraising capacity, while enjoying none of the protections or security of paid directors. They can be removed without the procedural protections that employment law provides to paid workers. They are simultaneously over-responsible (for decisions that affect lives) and under-supported (without the understandable information, supportive training, or administratively relevant infrastructure that paid directors take for granted).

(b) The Asymmetry of Orientation

Organisations typically orient volunteers to the organisation's needs rather than to the volunteers' own needs and aspirations. The onboarding process for a new volunteer is almost always focused on the organisation: its history, its policies, its procedures, its expectations. The volunteer is introduced to what the organisation needs from her. She is rarely asked what she needs from the organisation: what she hopes to gain, what skills she wants to develop, what questions she wants answered.

This asymmetry is deeply revealing. It suggests that the organisation understands the volunteer relationship primarily in instrumental terms. The volunteer is a resource to be deployed. Her own flourishing is, at very best, a secondary consideration.

© The Absence of Development Planning

Few voluntary organisations operate systematic development planning for their volunteers comparable to the HR processes that most paid employees take for granted. Volunteers rarely have annual reviews. They rarely receive structured feedback on their performance. Their progression within the organisation, where it exists at all, is informal and ad hoc rather than planned and supported. What they do get is unsubstantial, secondary, and seemingly lacking in value.

The practical consequence is that volunteers plateauremain in roles that no longer challenge or engage them or drift away from organisations that have nothing more to offer them, without the organisation ever learning from their departure.

(d) Training as Compliance

Where volunteer training exists, it is frequently focused on the organisation's needs rather than the volunteer's. New volunteer orientation programmes are typically designed to ensure that volunteers understand the organisation's policies, procedures, legal obligations, and risk management frameworks. In other words, to ensure that they do not cause problems for the organisation. The implicit message is that training is about protecting the organisation, not developing the volunteer.

This is a serious misorientation. Volunteer training should be a two-way process: an opportunity for the organisation to invest in the volunteer's capabilities and an opportunity for the volunteer to develop skills, knowledge, and confidence that will serve her in the organisation and beyond.

(e) The Failure of Recognition

Most voluntary organisations perform very badly at recognition. They may sometimes (when they remember?) have long-service awards and annual thank-you events. But they rarely think carefully about what genuine recognition means: the accurate acknowledgement of what a volunteer has contributed, the honest assessment of her achievements, and the recognition of her as a person with a history and a future rather than a function with an expiry date.

This failure of recognition is connected to the absence of systematic record-keeping about volunteer contributions. Many organisations cannot tell you, with any precision, what their volunteers have

personally achieved over the course of a year. They know that volunteers have been present. They do not know what has changed as a result. And without that knowledge, genuine recognition is impossible.

(f) The Absence of Exit Processes

Perhaps the most telling indicator of an organisation's ethical regard for its volunteers is what happens when a volunteer leaves. In most voluntary organisations, the answer is: nothing. The volunteer stops attending. The organisation does not conduct an exit conversation. It does not record why the volunteer left. It does not offer any form of transition support. It does not ask whether there was anything it could have done differently. And in particular, it doesn't take much interest in what happens to them later.

This absence of process is not merely administratively negligent. It communicates, loud and clear, that the volunteer's departure is of no consequence. That she can be replaced as easily as a spent resource. That her leaving is not a loss.

The Question of Whistleblowing

The failures catalogue above (secondary status, orientation asymmetry, absent development planning, compliance-focused training, recognition deficits, and the absence of exit processes) are not isolated problems. They are symptoms of a systemic ethical failure that the voluntary sector has never adequately confronted.

The question is what structural remedy can address a systemic problem. We suggest that one necessary, though not sufficient, condition for reform is a robust, mandatory Whistleblowing Charter for voluntary organisations, binding on all registered charities and community interest companies, with meaningful mechanisms for enforcement.

The case for this is straightforward. Volunteers who experience mistreatment within their organisations are currently without effective remedy. They can leave — but leaving does not address the underlying problem, which may affect other volunteers in the future. They can complain internally. But internal complaints mechanisms are, by definition, operated by the organisation in which the volunteer has lost confidence. They can go to the Charity Commission — but the Commission's regulatory reach over internal volunteer management is limited and rarely invoked for this class of complaint.

The absence of any accessible, credible external mechanism means that serious instances of volunteer mistreatment (coercion, exploitation, harassment, and the systematic failure to treat volunteers as persons with their own interests and agency) go unaddressed. The problem is hidden. The organisation faces no accountability. The volunteer bears the cost.

A Whistleblowing Charter, developed in partnership with the voluntary sector itself, and embedded in the regulatory infrastructure that already governs charities, would begin to address this accountability deficit. Such a Charter should include, at minimum:

- a clear statement of volunteers' rights within their organisations;
- an independent reporting mechanism for volunteers who have exhausted internal complaints processes;
- protection from adverse treatment for volunteers who make genuine complaints;
- and a public register of organisations against which substantiated complaints have been upheld.

Conclusion: An Ethical Demand

The voluntary sector in the United Kingdom does extraordinary work. It supports some of the most vulnerable people in society, advocates for those who have no voice, and builds the social capital on which any functioning community depends. The volunteers who sustain this work deserve, at minimum, to be treated as persons (**as ends in themselves**, in Kant's phrase) rather than as means to the organisations' ends.

They are not always treated in this way. The structural pressures on voluntary organisations, combined with the ideological mythology of pure altruism, create systematic incentives for the instrumentalisation of volunteer labour. The specific failures catalogue above are the observable consequences of that systemic incentive.

The Whistleblowing Charter proposed here is not a comprehensive solution. The voluntary sector needs a deeper cultural shift. It needs a recognition, at the level of organisational practice, that volunteers are not resources to be deployed but persons to be respected. But cultural shifts do not happen in a vacuum. They require structural supports. A mandatory Whistleblowing Charter, with real enforcement mechanisms and genuine protections for volunteers who speak up, would be one such support.

It is, finally, a matter of ethical seriousness. The voluntary sector asks enormous things of the people who give their time to it. It is not unreasonable to ask, in return, that it treat those people with the dignity they deserve.

Bibliography

Doyal, L. and Gough, I. (1991) *A Theory of Human Need*. London: Macmillan.

Haski-Leventhal, K. (2009) 'Ethical Volunteering', *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 14(2), pp. 117–131.

Kant, I. (1785) *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Translated by M. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Marshall, T.H. (1950) *Citizenship and Social Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

NCVO (2024) *UK Civil Society Almanac 2024*. London: National Council for Voluntary Organisations.

Selznick, P. (1949) *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Organization*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.

This essay was co-authored by Bea Groves-McDaniel and SAL-9000 on 8 November 2026.