

Blogs

Story

13 juillet 2018

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Volunteering: a tool for social integration in cities

Together with the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, my role is to bring together all Londoners and strengthen our communities. One of the most important lessons I have learned is the power of volunteering in achieving those goals.

Matthew Ryder, Deputy Mayor of London, discusses with school children.
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(Greater London Authority, 2017)

Earlier this year, we launched our social integration strategy. Based on considerable research, it sets out a new definition of social integration – emphasizing that it is about more than simply the degree of contact between people but also includes promoting equality and improving people’s levels of activity and participation in their local communities.

But encouraging social integration is a meaningless exercise unless people are provided with opportunities to come together. Volunteering does just that.

Volunteering helps citizens to connect with others in their local communities who may be from entirely different backgrounds. It creates bonds and shared identities that go beyond superficial differences that might otherwise seem important. Volunteering also provides a meaningful way of grappling with social problems – for example, reducing social isolation or improving mental health – for both the volunteer and the person benefiting from the volunteering.

Of course, volunteering is not the only way to improve social integration, nor does it solve every problem. But it is a hugely important tool that government and local authorities can use to bring people together. We know that all Londoners want to feel like valued members of their community and to play an active role in the decisions that shape our city.

But we need to understand better how we attract volunteers and why some people may choose to volunteer in their communities while others do not. For instance, we know older Londoners are more likely to volunteer, and that is why we are supporting a digital reward and recognition pilot to incentivize and reward volunteering among young Londoners. The Mayor’s new multimillion-pound community sport programme, “Sport Unites”, will also focus on ways to better support Londoners who support social integration through volunteering to teach, coach and participate in sports.

Most importantly, the Mayor is determined to find more effective ways to normalize volunteering as part of Londoners’ everyday lives. That means making it easier for people to find activities that suit their interests but also ensuring that employers better support their staff to volunteer in their local community.

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This article is featured in the 2018 State of the World's Volunteerism Report, **The thread that binds**, a United Nations flagship publication that presents new evidence on the role of volunteerism in strengthening community resilience. The report will launch on 18 July 2018 in New York at 1:15 - 2:30 EST.

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