

Almost as an antidote to the (sometimes) maniacal consumerism of an approaching Christmas, each year at Volunteer Edinburgh we see an increasing number of people contacting us looking for volunteering opportunities over the Christmas period.

Their motivations are varied; some are looking to capture the “true spirit” of Christmas and driven by concern for others, are willing to give up their own festivities to help out wherever they can. Others may even be attempting to negate their own senses of isolation or loneliness over the holidays by getting involved and helping out. A few might be escaping the sometimes stressful “family” situations or simply want to do something different. In previous years we have had a range of enquiries from a singles club who wanted advertise this alternative at Christmas to their members, and a company staff team who were trying to locate a volunteering opportunity instead of having the traditional Christmas lunch.

Whether it is teams, individuals or families, many people are surprised when they contact us and find that there are limited choices. In actual fact we tend to start contacting volunteer involving organisations in the late summer trying to identify those who can offer short term volunteering opportunities over Christmas. With over 1,000 organisations registered with us in Edinburgh it might surprise you to learn that usually only a handful of organisations are able to offer any short-term opportunities and most of these are in the weeks leading up to Christmas, rather than on Christmas Day itself.

Ideas of homelessness centres and “soup kitchens” prevail among the public but the reality is that where these services exist in the city, and they certainly do exist, the organisations that run them will use volunteers who are known to them, and who have volunteered for them throughout the year.

It is not just organisations supporting the homeless either, many charities and statutory bodies such as hospitals will use volunteers during the holidays but practicalities such as training needs, police checks on volunteers (needed when working with children or vulnerable groups), and crucially establishing a relationship with the volunteer and gauging their reliability to show up and do the work, are all very valid reasons why volunteer managers tend to stick understandably with who they know.

It goes completely against the grain of Volunteer Edinburgh to say to anyone that there isn't a volunteering opportunity for them. In the case of Christmas, it is true that opportunities on the day itself are very limited and unfortunately it is not just as simple as dropping in somewhere on Christmas Day and doing your bit. Our advice is simple. Think now about volunteering throughout the year. If you have an area of interest get involved early, volunteering, like dogs, really isn't just for Christmas.

The good news is that there are literally thousands of ways people can volunteer in Edinburgh throughout the year and commitments vary from as little as an hour a week. Most importantly the choice is huge and any volunteering; regardless of when it is done should be a rewarding and enjoyable part of your life. Better still, by getting involved now and getting established within an organisation, it will mean that next year your Christmas volunteering wish might come true.

We thought the team of office workers who wanted something on the run up to Christmas in lieu of the traditional office party was a stroke of genius. Much like booking a restaurant, early notice would have meant that we would almost definitely have been able to help them. It's great that people are willing to help others at any time of year, especially at Christmas, and be in no doubt that it is that sort of commitment and energy from volunteers that makes this city work. But if you want to play your part, and we'd love you to, please get involved early.