

# How to become... an Active Citizen

## What is Active Citizenship?

Active Citizenship is about:

- Taking an interest in your community
- Having your say as a resident
- Taking part in decisions that affect you
- Above all it's about ordinary people making things happen

## You can:

- Keep it small and local as a good neighbour or community group member
- Take direct action as a community activist to campaign and lobby your council or other government agencies to change or improve services
- Advise and influence the system as a consulted citizen through consultations and questionnaires
- Give your time as a managed volunteer to support a local charity or public service
- Take a lead in your community as a citizen governor to get involved in making decisions

These are explained throughout this guide with stories from real life active citizens.

**A good neighbour** is someone who responds to the needs of friends and those they meet in the course of their daily life. For example, by doing the shopping for someone who is unable to get out.

**Example:** Meili is an enormous help to her two elderly neighbours. She gets their shopping and prescriptions, helps them with physical domestic jobs and filling in forms.

*"I'd never thought of myself as an active citizen. The things I help out with are small to me but make a big difference to them."*

Citizens have more power than they realise. As an Active Citizen you can have a say on new developments and how things are run.

This guide explains how you can get involved.



## A citizen governor

is a citizen who advises or makes decisions about a public service.

For example, someone may be a school governor, charity trustee, lay magistrate or be on a management committee, tenants panel or regeneration board.

**Example:** Bev has been a local lay magistrate for ten years. She is a mentor for new magistrates and conducts appraisals for existing ones.

*"I am able to bring my local knowledge and experiences to the court system and this ensures that local views are considered when dealing with each case."*

**Volunteers** are involved in many voluntary organisations and statutory services to provide services to the community. For example, many charities involve volunteers in roles ranging from desk administration and website design to running arts and craft classes for children.

**Example:** Iris runs a Hospice shop as a volunteer and in doing so has gained experience in many fields.

*“Volunteering builds confidence. I have met and made many new friends.”*

**A community group member** is someone who is part of either an organised or informal collection of people who come together for a purpose or unite around an issue. For example, citizens may be part of a playgroup to which they bring their children, help people with gardening or run a guides group.

**Example:** Siddika became part of a women’s support and friendship group. She used her Bengali language skills to act as an interpreter for ethnic minority women subject to domestic violence. The group supported her through a Freedom Training course.

*“I’m easy to get on with and I like helping people.”*

## Active citizen story

Safia came to the UK from Somalia. She has found herself involved in lots of community activities including being on the management committee of the SE5 Forum in Camberwell and as a Somali-English interpreter working on an Advocacy project on a local estate.

*“Local people and especially Somalis are just not represented enough when decisions are made and I want to speak out on behalf of them.”*

## Myth buster

Active citizenship is NOT about nationality. You do NOT need to be a British national or hold a UK passport to be active. All you need is a desire to see your community improve and lots of enthusiasm!



## A consulted citizen

communicates with their council, service providers and voluntary organisations. Public bodies like these want to involve people and communities in improving the planning and delivery of the services they provide through consultations.

**Example:** Ben takes a keen interest in local affairs. He has responded to local consultations on planning developments to provide feedback, and contacts the council over his concerns and suggestions.

*“I feel that it is very important that I have an interest in what happens in the area, know what is going on and try and put across my needs and opinions.”*

**The community activist** initiates action to achieve something they want to change by setting up a campaign or organising a network. They may write to their MP, lobby public service providers and other organisations to influence what they do. It may involve creating posters or setting up information stalls.

**Example:** Barry is a local activist. He set up a local cycling community group to promote cycling and campaign for better cycling facilities.

*“I am passionate about cycling as an unselfish mode of transport.”*



## Time and expense

You can choose the amount of time you spend as an active citizen, from filling in the occasional questionnaire about public services, meeting as part of a community group once a week to working part-time as a lay magistrate.

Many employers support active citizens with time off work for public duties, and the voluntary organisation will usually pay expenses.

**As an active citizen you can improve your local area!**

## Further information

Contact your local council or voluntary services to find out how you can become involved in your local area. See other How to Guide publications for information on particular community roles.

You can search for volunteering opportunities online at:

[www.do-it.org](http://www.do-it.org)

[www.volunteering.org.uk/](http://www.volunteering.org.uk/)

[www.citizensadvice.org.uk/join-us](http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/join-us)

[www.volunteermatch.org/](http://www.volunteermatch.org/)

[www.csv.org.uk/volunteering](http://www.csv.org.uk/volunteering)

For volunteering with specific national organisations visit:

[www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-trust/w-volunteering.htm](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-trust/w-volunteering.htm)

[www.redcross.org.uk/Get-involved/Volunteer](http://www.redcross.org.uk/Get-involved/Volunteer)

[www.english-heritage.org.uk/education/education-volunteering/](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/education/education-volunteering/)