

Starting a volunteer programme

This information sheet explains what you should think about prior to starting a volunteer programme. It may also be helpful for organisations reviewing existing volunteer involvement. This guidance complements our *Planning for volunteer involvement* information sheet, which focuses on getting ready to recruit to individual roles. Here we look at the organisational preparation needed to work with volunteers in general.

This document covers:

- Considering the overall role of volunteers within an organisation
- The role of a Volunteer Manager or Coordinator
- Risk assessing volunteer involvement
- Getting the right policies and procedures in place
- Resources needed for volunteer involvement

We want to involve volunteers – where do we start?

The first step is to think about what it is you are expecting volunteers to do. What roles will they be carrying out? Sometimes this is obvious – if you're a small community group with maybe one or even no paid staff volunteers will be needed to do more or less everything. But for other groups it makes sense to think through why you are involving volunteers and what ethos underpins your volunteer programme. Questions to consider around volunteers include:

- How do they relate to paid staff?
- Are you involving them to add value to your work?
- Are cuts leading to the involvement of volunteers in core roles?
- What boundaries will you place on volunteer involvement?

Getting clarity on these issues can help you avoid problems further down the line – for example, paid staff might be concerned about volunteer involvement where it hasn't been made clear why and in what roles you will be working with volunteers.

There may be some difficult issues to address. It's often said that volunteers should not be used to displace paid staff, but you might be faced with the choice of ceasing a service altogether or keeping it running by involving volunteers. So here you might consider under what circumstances you will do this, what volunteers would actually be doing, whether to

clarify that this is an emergency measure that you hope to rectify as soon as possible and so on.

Similar questions come up when thinking about recruiting to individual roles – see *Planning for volunteer involvement*.

Who will take responsibility for volunteer involvement?

Someone needs to take on responsibility for overseeing your involvement of volunteers. This may well be a different person from the staff working with and supporting volunteers on a day-to-day basis. This role is often referred to as Volunteer Manager or Volunteer Coordinator where it forms a distinct position. In smaller groups someone will often be carrying out this function alongside another role. Where this is the case they should be given adequate time and support for the volunteer management aspect of their work.

The role of a Volunteer Manager, as distinct from someone who supervises volunteers might include:

- Providing a strategic lead for volunteering internally
- Writing and revising policies and procedures – and ensuring they are being followed
- Supporting staff who work with volunteers
- Overseeing volunteer recruitment
- Communicating with and getting feedback from volunteers
- Volunteer recognition and acknowledgement (i.e. finding ways to say ‘thank you’ to volunteers).
- Improving volunteer management practice internally
- Monitoring, evaluating and reporting on volunteer involvement

Volunteer Managers shouldn't be working in a vacuum. They need support, and organisational buy-in from the top down. Senior managers should take volunteering seriously. After all, volunteers are an important resource. Attention should be paid to them in the same way senior staff would regard finances and human resources.

What risks are associated with volunteer involvement? How do we manage them?

We often think of risk assessment as solely to do with health and safety, but there are all kinds of risks that we may need to consider. With volunteers risks can include:

Health and safety: There may be physical risks to volunteers and/or the people they will be working with and supporting. Or perhaps risks to their mental health through, say stress.

Safeguarding: volunteers may be working with children or vulnerable adults. Alternatively you may be involving young people or vulnerable adults as volunteers.

Financial risk: Volunteers are not cost free and there might be budgetary implications in involving them. Or they could be fundraising, or handling money.

Reputational risk: Volunteers will be acting on behalf of the organisation – their behaviour could impact on the way it is seen within the community. In addition, volunteers are members of the community themselves – if they are poorly treated or unhappy due to poor management then this too could reflect badly on the organisation.

Organisational risk: Paid staff may feel threatened by the presence of volunteers. The organisation as a whole may not properly support or engage with volunteering. If volunteers are being recruited as part of a project the project could fail.

The principles of risk management apply whatever the nature of the risk. The Health and Safety Executive's 5 steps to risk assessment are:

1. Identify the hazards
That is, what could go wrong?
2. Decide who might be harmed and how
Individuals, the organisation?
3. Evaluate the risks and decide on precautions
Often this is done by thinking about both the likelihood of the hazard and its seriousness. You could assess each as low, medium or high, or on a numerical scale such as 1-5.

Some risks will have a low likelihood and a low seriousness, but elsewhere you should take steps to manage risk. The steps will of course depend on the nature of the hazard. It's sensible to have more than one pair of eyes assessing risk and looking at precautions.

4. Record your significant findings
This is most important for health and safety and safeguarding issues, but it makes sense to keep everything in writing in any case.
5. Review your assessment and update if necessary
Risk assessments have to remain current. Update them whenever something changes about the activity, or where you have noticed that either a hazard had not been considered, or the initial assessment of the level of risk might not have been correct. It also makes sense to review assessments annually.

What policies and procedures do we need to have in place?

Some of your organisational policies should encompass volunteers, either due to your legal responsibilities towards them or the people they work with. Typically this would include:

- Health and Safety Policy
- Equalities/Equal Opportunities/Diversity Policy
- Safeguarding/Child Protection/Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy
- Confidentiality Policy

Beyond this it makes sense to have some volunteering-specific policies and procedures in place to give a structure to your involvement of volunteers.

Volunteer policy

A volunteer policy sets out how volunteers will be involved. This is a good place to spell out the values and ethos behind your volunteer involvement. It should also cover topics such as

- Recruitment
- Induction
- Training
- Support and Supervision
- Health and Safety
- Equalities
- Dealing with problems

The exact content will depend on your circumstances. For example, you may need to include safeguarding, or confidentiality. Some content may simply summarise and signpost to longer documents. It's generally best if the policy isn't too long and involved – you want volunteers to read and understand it.

Volunteer handbook/induction pack

The volunteer handbook is like a reference guide for volunteers. It sometimes takes the form of an induction pack, gathering together the information and documents a volunteer needs to be aware of on starting their role. It's a good place to give information such as the history and purpose of the organisation and how it is run, or about staff and volunteer meetings, where to store bags and clothing and so on. A good rule of thumb for content once a handbook is in place is to ask current volunteers 'What would have been good for you to know when you started? What took you 3 months to find or work out?'

Volunteer agreement

A volunteer agreement sets out what the volunteer should expect from the organisation and what the organisation expects of its volunteers. It is not intended to be a legally binding

document (in fact you want to avoid it coming across as one, as this could contribute to the volunteer acquiring employment status in law), and should be simple, straightforward and short – one side of A4 is usually sufficient.

Recruitment and Supervision procedures

These describe how you will recruit and support volunteers. This could be covered by a few paragraphs in the handbook or policy. In larger organisations it makes more sense to have separate procedures or guidelines to help ensure consistency.

Problem solving procedures

The equivalent of disciplinary and grievance procedures, these will help provide a structure for when things go wrong. They may mirror those used for paid workers, but should be as clear and easy to follow as possible. Volunteers need to know where they stand if you raise an issue with them, or if they have a complaint about their treatment.

Other documents you'd need or should consider include:

- Application /Registration form
- Volunteer file (to hold details like the registration form, training records, task description, supervision records and so on).
- Risk assessments
- Task descriptions
- Induction checklist (a list of things that you want each volunteer to be told/given as part of the induction process).
- Exit questionnaire (to be given to volunteers when they leave, a good way of getting feedback on your volunteer involvement)
- Evaluation forms (or some other process for monitoring/evaluating volunteer involvement)

Do you have the necessary resources in place for volunteers?

Volunteers are unpaid but not cost free. There will be resource implications whatever the volunteer role. These could include:

Money – if at all possible you should budget for volunteer expenses. Reimbursing out of pocket expenses such as travel and food makes a real difference to benefits claimants or people on low incomes considering volunteering. There might be other things to spend money on, such as posters or leaflets.

Space – how many volunteers can you reasonably accommodate? For example, could you guarantee that a volunteer coming in every Friday to help with admin would always have a desk free to work at?

Equipment – similarly, what equipment would volunteers need and will there be enough?

Staff time - who will be directly line-managing volunteers, and do they have the time to do so? People supporting volunteering should be aware that this will take up some of their time, and allowances should be made for this within their workplans.

Recruiting, inducting, training and supporting volunteers takes time. This might also include other employees - for example, volunteers could require safeguarding training, which has to be delivered by a particular member of staff.

Is there anything else to consider?

See our *Planning for volunteer involvement* information sheet for more to think about before recruiting to individual roles.

Further information:

Volunteer Centre Bexley information sheet

Planning for volunteer involvement

Health and Safety Executive risk management subsite:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/risk/>

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