

Writing a Volunteer Policy

The involvement of volunteers in any organisation can be a rewarding experience for both the volunteers and for the organisation. However if the involvement of volunteers in your organisation is not given enough thought and care then it can also become a source of difficulty. Below and on the related Managing Volunteers factsheet are some tips and ideas about how to successfully involve volunteers in your organisation.

1. Developing a volunteer policy

Before recruiting new volunteers you should think carefully about what they will be doing, how they will be supported, supervised and managed and what will help to keep volunteers motivated. The process of producing a Volunteer Policy, voluntary work outlines and volunteer agreements should result in the roles of volunteers becoming easier and clearer. The format and what you include will depend on the nature of the organisation and the work volunteers do. A volunteer policy is a document that details your approach and commitment to volunteers. A policy helps to define the relationship between the organisation and volunteers, clarifying expectations and responsibilities. Developing consistent procedures for working with volunteers should result in volunteers feeling more supported, recognised and more motivated. A volunteer policy can be a relatively short and simple document, using clear language which should be made available to everyone in the organisation.

The policy should include statements on some or all of the following topics:

- Why your organisation wants to involve volunteers.
- Recruitment and selection - how will volunteers be recruited, will there be application forms, interviews and a probationary period?
- Volunteer tasks - what range of voluntary work is available in the organisation?
- Supervision and support - who will be responsible for this and what form it will take?
- Equal opportunities - does the organisations policy include volunteers? All staff and volunteers should be treated in line with the equal opportunities policy.
- Insurance – are volunteers covered? It is important to ensure that volunteers are insured for the work that they do. For more information see the information sheet Insurance.
- Health and safety - volunteers should be made aware that they are included in the health and safety policy.
- Grievance and disciplinary procedures - what systems are in place that cover volunteers? It is good practice to have clear, written guidelines on what will happen when problems arise, but it might be useful to develop procedures specifically for volunteers that are less formal than for paid workers.
- Confidentiality – do volunteers have the same responsibilities for confidentiality as paid staff?
- Encourage volunteers to participate in your organisation's decision making processes. This ensures democracy and participation and can help to keep volunteers motivated and involved in the organisation.

2. Voluntary work outlines

It is a good idea for volunteers to have specific roles rather than taking on volunteers to help out within the organisation in general. Without defined roles volunteers can lack direction, or be given jobs that no one else wants to do. This could quickly lead to overload, demotivation and ultimately to losing volunteers.

A voluntary work outline is similar to a job description in that it outlines what tasks a volunteer will perform and what skills and experience are needed but it can be relatively simple and less formal. This helps to give volunteers and everyone else in the organisation a clear idea of what is expected. A simple voluntary work outline should include:

- The tasks involved;
- Who the volunteer is responsible to;
- Skills and experience required;
- Location of the role.

3. Volunteer agreements

A volunteer agreement describes the arrangement between the organisation and a volunteer for the work they will do. It informs a volunteer what they can expect from the organisation and what they agree to undertake. It will largely be determined by what is in the volunteer policy, but is a specific document based on the volunteer's situation.

It should include details of:

The organisation's commitment to provide adequate

- Induction and training;
- Support, supervision and feedback;
- Expenses;
- Health and safety;
- Equal opportunities;
- Insurance.

That the volunteer commits to:

- Work to the best of their ability;
- Follow policies and procedures;
- Maintain confidentiality;
- Make a specific time commitment;
- Inform you if they are unable to do their voluntary work;
- Provide references if required.

Having written volunteer policies and agreements does not create contracts of employment. In fact, a volunteer policy helps to clarify the unique contribution volunteers make to an organisation and shows how this is distinct to that of paid workers. In order to be certain of not creating a legal contract with volunteers here are a few simple measures that can be taken when creating formal documents:

- Avoid the language of legal rights and obligations e.g. employer/employment, contract, sick leave, annual leave, holiday entitlement.
- Insert a clear statement on written documents that no legal contract or relationship of employment is being created.
- A contract is more likely to be implied if a volunteer is required to do something in return for something else. The organisations expectations should be written in terms of expectations, not obligations.
- Ensure that your volunteer policy is a working document that puts into practice how your organisation works with volunteers in the way that your policy states.

4. Expenses

Volunteers should not have to incur costs to volunteer for an organisation. It is good practice to offer to pay all volunteers out of pocket expenses for costs incurred while volunteering, otherwise some people will be prevented from volunteering. Expenses could be paid for the following:

- Travel;
- Meals (usually if volunteering for over a minimum agreed period);
- Postage and telephone costs if working from home;
- Care of dependants; • Protective clothing or essential equipment;
- Costs of petrol used in the course of volunteering.
- Organisations should only pay volunteers actual out of pocket expenses and not fixed amounts per session or lump sums. Paying more than actual out of pocket expenses can cause two main problems:
- Volunteers may be penalised by the Benefits Agency or be liable to taxation;
- It increases the possibility of volunteers being classed as employees.