

VOICES - Briefing Paper 1

A Volunteer Policy



What is a Volunteer Policy?

A volunteer policy is a framework for a volunteer programme. It enables an organisation to look at the benefits and challenges that come with working with volunteers and clarifies their role within the organisation and how they can expect to be treated. It brings together the various policies and procedures that affect volunteers - recruitment, expenses, health and safety and so on.

Why should your organisation have a Volunteer Policy?

Commitment - A volunteer policy would demonstrate your organisation's commitment to its volunteer programme and its individual volunteers. It shows that care and thought has gone into the volunteer programme

Consistency - Volunteers are a diverse range of people. Being able to refer to a written policy ensures that decisions are consistent and not made on an ad hoc basis and that all volunteers are treated equally and fairly.

Clarity - A policy allows volunteers to know where they stand; it offers some security, in that they know how they can expect to be treated and where they can turn to if they feel that things are going wrong.

Unity - It also helps ensure that your organisation's paid staff and trustees fully understand why volunteers are involved and what role they have within the organisation.

Using volunteers for the first time

If your organisation has not yet started to work with volunteers, a policy is the ideal starting point to consider exactly how they will be involved in the work, as it encompasses everything from recruitment to supervision and dealing with any problems that may arise.

If your organisation already involves volunteers, then this is a good place to review your policy.

Process

The process of writing a volunteer policy is almost as important as having the document itself. This process will encourage your organisation to look at:

- why and how it wants to involve volunteers
- where volunteers fit alongside your organisation's aims, structure and paid staff
- Consider exactly why your organisation wants to involve volunteers and how they fit into the day-to-day life and work of the organisation.
- It is important to consult as widely as possible when drawing up the policy. The more input there is, the more relevant the policy is likely to be and the more ownership people will feel of it:
- Steering group - it may help to have a representative steering group to draw up the policy and regularly review it.

What should the volunteer policy focus on?

The needs of your organisation - there is no blueprint for volunteer policies. Every organisation has its own unique needs that should be reflected in its policy.

Keep it short - most organisations have a relatively short policy that refers to other separate policies such as health and safety. One way to view it is as a statement of intent, with the day-to-day issues covered in separate policies or a volunteer handbook.

What should the volunteer policy cover?

- It should start with an explanation of what your organisation does and why it wants to involve volunteers in its work. It should explain why volunteers are being asked to donate their time and in what way their efforts are helping your organisation's aims.
- It should also include a statement of intent, setting out the principles guiding the involvement of volunteers e.g. that your organisation will not use volunteers to replace paid staff.
- It should include some information about your organisation's recruitment process
- It should include role descriptions, induction and training for volunteers, trial period, expenses such as travel, meals, child care etc., support and supervision processes
- Volunteers' insurance either under public or employer's liability cover.
- While volunteers are generally not covered by equal opportunities legislation, it is clearly good practice to include them in your equal opportunities policy.
- Health and Safety - including basic information about it in the volunteer policy and signpost volunteers to the health and safety policy itself.
- Complaints procedure - there should be clear procedures in place to deal with complaints by or about volunteers. It is preferable to have separate procedures from those for paid staff, both to ensure that they are as understandable and user-friendly as possible, and to keep some distinction between staff and volunteers.
- Including information about grievance and disciplinary procedures shows a well thought out strategy around involving volunteers and how your organisation would deal with any problems.
- Volunteers should be bound by the same requirements for confidentiality as paid staff. Including information about this in the organisation's policy may allay some potential fears among staff or people working with your organisation about volunteers being unprofessional.

Introducing the volunteer policy

Once the policy is written it will be necessary to ensure that it is read, understood and implemented properly as part of the everyday work of your organisation. All staff, volunteers and trustees should receive a copy, even employees who will not be supervising or working alongside volunteers.

All inductions, for staff, volunteers and trustees, should include discussion of the policy and a copy should be given to new personnel.

The organisation could use the policy as a framework for induction meetings with volunteers, as it refers to most of the issues that are important for volunteers to be aware of, such as health and safety and equal opportunities.

The policy can also be the basis of the information given to the people with which your organisation works with about why the organisation involves volunteers.

Accessibility

- **Clear English** - the policy should be written in clear English. If it reads like a legal or technical document then it isn't fulfilling its purpose. Volunteer policies are meant to be guidelines that everyone is aware of. If they are unnecessarily complicated or difficult to understand they will not be followed.
- Accessibility issues are not just about a discrete box labelled 'disability'. Any document given to volunteers should be readable and understandable
- **Identifying needs** - discussing the policy with volunteers at induction helps identify needs; volunteers with English as a second language or a learning disability may require some parts of the policy to be clarified. It may be appropriate to provide translations.
- **Format** - the policy should be clearly readable by people with sight problems. A sans serif font such as Arial is easier to read. Use a minimum size of 12 point type - RNIB recommends 14 point. Black text on a white or yellow background without columns or boxes is easier to read. Bullet points can be a clear and easily readable way to emphasise certain parts of the policy.

Reviewing and revising the policy

The flexible nature of volunteering means circumstances can change much more quickly than with paid staff so it makes sense to review the policy every year to adapt or improve it. As when writing the policy, input from volunteers and paid staff will help in evaluating its relevance and usefulness.

Having such a process in place helps keep the policy a living document. Even if very little is revised, the act of looking through it reminds people of what it says and underlines its importance within the organisation.

