

Get it Right from the Start

Volunteer policies –
the key to diverse
volunteer involvement

For Everyone Who Works With Volunteers

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Introduction

In March 2000 the Prime Minister set the voluntary sector a challenge to achieve 'a really diverse involvement of people with their organisations – a diversity that reflects the nation we live in'.

This booklet will help your organisation meet that challenge, by showing how you can be more welcoming to potential volunteers.

When considering whether or not to volunteer there are a number of questions that potential volunteers may ask themselves. Your organisation needs to consider how to answer them.

This booklet can help you to consider why and how you might extend your reach to potential volunteers, and how you can overcome the barriers that are stopping them from volunteering. It also suggests how you can support volunteers once they are in place and ways of recognising and rewarding their contribution to your organisation.

What is a volunteer policy and why do you need one?

Quite simply, a volunteer policy is the foundation on which your organisation's involvement of volunteers should be based.

It forms the basis of your entire volunteer programme, giving cohesion and consistency to all the elements in your organisation that affect volunteers (recruitment, expenses, health and safety and so on). It is the key to involving a diversity of volunteers, because it helps to define the role of volunteers within the organisation, and how they can expect to be treated.

- A volunteer policy demonstrates an organisation's commitment both to its volunteer programme and to its individual volunteers. By having a policy in place, you are showing that care and thought has gone into the volunteer programme.
- It helps to ensure fairness and consistency. Dealing with volunteers means dealing with a diverse range of people. Being able to refer to a written policy ensures that decisions are not made on an ad hoc basis, and that all volunteers are treated equally and fairly.
- A policy enables volunteers to know where they stand. It offers them 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.
- It also helps ensure that paid staff, senior management and trustees fully understand why volunteers are involved, and what role they have within the organisation.

If your organisation is not yet working with volunteers, drawing up a volunteer policy is the ideal starting point to consider exactly how you will involve them in your activities.

Where to start

The first step in drawing up a volunteer policy is to think about exactly why you are involving volunteers. How do they fit into the day-to-day life and work of the organisation? If you are considering introducing volunteers for the first time, this could be very enlightening. You may discover that different staff have different ideas about why you are bringing volunteers in, for instance.

Always consult as widely as possible when drawing up the policy. The more input you receive, the more relevant the policy is likely to be – and the more people are likely to feel ownership of it.

Make sure colleagues from all levels of the organisation are involved in the consultation. It's very important that you include volunteers, so that they feel the policy is something they have contributed to rather than something that has been imposed upon them.

Involving paid staff is equally important. If your organisation is planning to involve volunteers for the first time, employees may be concerned by the implications of this, so involving them from the beginning will help clarify the role of volunteers in the organisation.

Involvement from senior management is also key, as it helps to ensure that the document is taken seriously within the organisation.

It's also a good idea to set up a representative steering group to review the policy regularly. The whole point of a volunteer policy is that it should reflect the needs of the organisation. If it does not, it will just be filed away and ignored. Reviewing the policy on a regular basis helps ensure that it stays up to date and 'live'.

What should be in it?

There is no set format for volunteer policies. Each organisation has its own unique needs that should be reflected in its policy. An organisation that works with volunteers befriending people with learning difficulties is going to have a different policy to that of one carrying out conservation work, for instance.

Most organisations prefer to have a short volunteer policy that refers to other separate documents (covering health and safety, for example). This is probably the best option, as a long document can be very overwhelming. Try viewing the policy as a statement of intent, with the day-to-day nuts and bolts covered in separate policies or in a volunteer handbook.

There may be no blueprint for the perfect policy, but there are some specific issues that should always be addressed. The following section looks at these issues, and also sets out some of the questions you should be asking yourself as you draw up your policy.

First things first

Start your policy with an explanation of what the organisation does, and why it involves volunteers in its

work. This helps to put both the policy and the volunteer programme in context. Understandably, volunteers like to know why they are being asked to donate their time, and in what way their efforts are helping the aims of the organisation.

This is also the place to include a statement of intent, setting out the principles that will inform your involvement of volunteers – for example, this is where to state that you will not use volunteers to replace paid staff.

Recruitment

It's a good idea to include a couple of sentences about your recruitment process in the policy. Remember, you don't have to include everything – you can always refer people on to other documents. But some points are worth including:

- How will you advertise for volunteers?
- Will you use application forms? If so, they should be very simple – both to avoid putting potential volunteers off, and to avoid excluding volunteers with poor written English.
- How will you interview volunteers?
- What will you do about references?
- How will you deal with people you feel are not right for the particular volunteer role they are interested in?
- If your organisation works with vulnerable clients, what procedures do you have in place to protect both them and your volunteers?

If you need help with any of these issues, then the Information Service at the National Centre for volunteering will be able to advise you – contact details are on page 18.

It can also be very useful to draw up volunteer role outlines. This will mean that volunteers have a clear description of the tasks their role involves. Such outlines can always be revised by agreement as part of the ongoing supervision of the volunteer.

Diversity

Recruitment should ideally also involve a diversity policy (see box). It's important to look at the methods of recruitment and the messages you use, to ensure you draw upon as wide a pool of potential volunteers as possible.

A sample diversity policy

Write a diversity policy that suits your organisation. A simple statement for small organisations might look like this:

“Our organisation is firmly committed to diversity in all areas of its work. We believe that we have much to learn and profit from diverse cultures and perspectives, and that diversity will make our organisation more effective in meeting the needs of all our stakeholders.

We are committed to developing and maintaining an organisation in which differing ideas, abilities, backgrounds and needs are fostered and valued, and where those with diverse backgrounds and experiences are able to participate and contribute.

We will regularly evaluate and monitor our progress towards diversity.”

Recruiting for diversity

An important step in getting volunteers from a diverse range of backgrounds can be creating the right recruitment materials. Here are some pointers to consider, whether you're designing posters and flyers yourself or briefing a designer (don't assume they know these guidelines):

- Use images that present a positive image of volunteering and reflect how you would like to see the ethos of your organisation. If you can't afford to commission a photographer use the National Centre for Volunteering's Image Bank.
- Ensure that the pictures 'speak to' the section or sections of the population you want to recruit from, but be careful not to fall into stereotypes. For example, not all older people have grey hair and not all gay men go clubbing!
- Do you need to translate your poster or flyer into other languages? Try and get it translated by a professional agency, if you can. Whether or not you can afford an agency, always get any translations double-checked, just as you would proof-read any document – sometimes words can lose their meaning, particularly if the word can't be translated literally (some languages don't have a word for 'volunteering' or 'caring', for example).
- Keep accessibility in mind, so partially sighted readers can read your materials. This is not just an issue of type style and size, but colours too. For example, black text on a yellow background is easier to read than white text on a red background.

The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) produces a set of guidelines on legibility including, for example:

- avoid italic, simulated handwriting and ornate typefaces as these can be difficult to read.
- avoid glossy paper because glare makes it difficult to read. Choose uncoated paper that weighs over 90gsm. As a general rule, if the text is showing through from the reverse side, then the paper is too thin.

For more on accessibility visit

www.rnib.org.uk/seeitright/welcome.htm#3

- Accessibility is more than just how you present your message; you also need to think about the words you use. Don't use jargon, acronyms or excessively complicated words. You may know that VB stands for Volunteer Bureau, for example, but the majority of the public won't.
- Accessibility extends to your web promotions too. Some partially sighted readers have special computers which read text on websites and relay it audibly. While there are several packages you can use to check that your site is readable in this way, Bobby Worldwide is perhaps the best known. For more information visit: www.cast.org/bobby/
- Remember that printed material may not be the best way to reach your target audience at all. You may want to consider:
 - producing your information on tape, video or in Braille. Again, the RNIB has information on this.

- talking to your local radio and see if they'll run a recruitment promotion.
- giving talks to local community groups.
- Try and work out what would 'hook' the audience you're trying to reach. If you're trying to encourage local students to volunteer, talk about how volunteering can enhance their CV. If, on the other hand, you want to recruit retired people, emphasise that volunteering can help put their skills to good use, or give them the opportunity to try something new, meet new people etc.

Where to display your materials

- Think about the target audiences you want to reach and where they might go. You might want to consider community centres, places of worship, supermarkets, local shops, cafes, clubs, libraries, colleges, gyms...
- Always ask permission of the owner before putting up any posters. In most areas there are local by-laws against flyposting (putting up posters without permission). So don't put up your posters in disused buildings, lamp-posts, tube stations, street furniture, pub toilets or other such public places.

Induction and training

Try to include some information about how volunteers are inducted and trained in your organisation. How are you going to make sure that volunteers are welcomed into the organisation? And that they are equipped with all the information and skills they need? You may wish to have a trial period, which also allows volunteers to discover whether or not they feel comfortable in their role.

How will the volunteers be able to access training? Remember that to avoid the possibility of creating a contract of employment with the volunteers, all training should be relevant to their role.

Expenses

Expenses are extremely important to volunteers, and are also important to your organisation in helping to attract a diverse volunteer 'workforce'. Reimbursing volunteers' expenses means that volunteering is accessible to all, regardless of income. Including information about the reimbursement of expenses in your policy makes it clear that your organisation values its volunteers and is actively making sure that barriers do not exist to volunteer involvement. However, it is important that volunteers are paid out-of-pocket expenses only, or your organisation could fall foul of national minimum wage legislation. Let volunteers know that reasonable expenses will be reimbursed. You could list such expenses – travel, meals, child care and so on.

Supervision and support

This section could be particularly important in reassuring paid employees, who may worry about who is going to support volunteers in the organisation and what their own role will be in relation to them. The kind of support that you provide for volunteers will depend on the type of work they are involved in. However, in most cases volunteers should have a named supervisor and regular supervision meetings to discuss any problems or issues that may arise.

Insurance

Insurance is a very important issue, but one that many people forget about in relation to volunteers. Including a sentence about how volunteers are insured is an easy way of making sure that everyone who comes into contact with your organisation can see that volunteers are covered. Volunteers should be insured under either public or employer's liability cover.

Equal opportunities and diversity

While volunteers are generally not covered by equal opportunities legislation, it is clearly good practice to include them in your equal opportunities and/or diversity policy. Ideally all your policies will have a commitment to equal opportunities and diversity at their heart. Restating your commitment to offering equal opportunity to volunteers from different backgrounds within your volunteer policy shows that you take the issue seriously and should indicate that all your organisation's other policies have been written with inclusivity in mind.

Many organisations are now becoming aware of the benefits of having a diverse volunteer 'workforce'. A diverse group of volunteers makes your organisation more welcoming to and more representative of the local community. Involving people from differing backgrounds, ages, cultures, genders and outlooks helps throw up new ideas and fresh approaches. Having a diversity policy in place helps move toward increasing the diversity of your volunteers. For more information see the diversity challenge website (www.diversitychallenge.org) or contact the Information Service at the National Centre for Volunteering (see page 18).

Health and safety

Organisations have a duty of care to avoid exposing volunteers to risks to their health and safety. Your organisation should have a health and safety policy in place, with volunteers being made aware of the policy and practical safety issues as part of their induction. Including basic information about the policy in your volunteer policy is a good way of reminding people about it and signposting them to the health and safety policy proper.

Grievance and disciplinary procedures

What will you do if a volunteer has a grievance with your organisation? Or if a volunteer has acted in an inappropriate manner? Including information about grievance and disciplinary procedures shows that you have a well-planned strategy around involving volunteers and have thought ahead about how you would deal with any problems.

Make sure that you have clear procedures in place to deal with complaints by or about volunteers. It's a good idea 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 distinctiveness between staff and volunteers.

Confidentiality

Volunteers should be bound by the same requirements for confidentiality as paid staff. Including information about this in your policy may well be helpful in calming some of the fears that staff or people working with your organisation may have about volunteers being 'unprofessional'.

The Information Service at the National Centre for Volunteering can advise you on any of these issues. See page 18 for how to contact them

Introducing the policy

Once the policy is written, your main task is to ensure that it doesn't sit unread in a filing cabinet. If it is to be implemented properly, people need to know the policy exists and to understand its purpose. Having a commitment to diversity and good practice means ensuring that the policy becomes part of the everyday life of your organisation.

It's often useful to introduce the policy with a meeting, which gives a chance to talk people through the policy and explain its importance.

All staff and volunteers should receive a copy, including those staff who will not be supervising or working alongside volunteers. Making it part of your induction pack will guarantee that new staff and volunteers will all receive a copy, and discussing the policy should be a part of each volunteer's induction.

The policy itself makes a decent framework for induction meetings with volunteers, as it refers to most of the issues that it is important for volunteers to be aware of, such as health and safety and equal opportunities.

Displaying a copy of the policy on noticeboards will give it some prominence, but you could be a little more creative. One idea may be to 'advertise' the policy internally – make up posters with key phrases from the policy together with images of volunteers.

You may also want to use the policy as the basis of the information that you give to the people you work with about why you involve volunteers. Sometimes people can be worried about accessing services involving volunteers and can feel that volunteers are amateur or untrained. A good volunteer policy can help to show why and how your organisation chooses to involve volunteers in its service delivery.

Accessibility

Try to make your volunteer policy as accessible as possible. Working with a diverse range of staff and volunteers means taking care to be as inclusive as possible.

Make sure the policy is 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, then they will not be followed.

Discussing the policy with volunteers at induction, as mentioned above, helps identify needs – for instance, volunteers with English as a second language or a learning difficulty may require some parts of the policy to be clarified. It may be appropriate to provide translations.

Look at the format of the policy itself, too. As with all written documents, care should be taken to ensure that it is clearly readable by people with sight problems. Stay

away from ornate typefaces. A sans serif font such as Arial is easier to read. Use a minimum size of 12-point type – 14-point is preferable, according to the Royal National Institute for the Blind. You may be tempted to design the policy to look as attractive as possible, but remember that black text on a white or yellow background without columns or boxes are easier to read. Bullet points can be a clear and easily readable way to emphasise certain parts of the policy.

Revising the policy

The flexible nature of volunteering means that 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 underlines its importance within the organisation.

Useful contacts

The Information Service at the National Centre for Volunteering can provide further advice on drawing up a volunteer policy. We also provide a policy review service, where we comment on draft or existing volunteer policies.

Contact our Freephone helpline (open 10.30-12.30am and 2.00-4.00pm Mon-Fri) on 0800 028 3304, or e-mail your query to Information@thecentre.org.uk

The National Centre for Volunteering

Regent's Wharf, 8 All Saints Street, London N1 9RL

Main Switchboard: 020 7520 8900

E-mail: Information@thecentre.org.uk

Website: www.volunteering.org.uk

Plain English Campaign

Plain English Campaign is an independent pressure group fighting for public information to be written in plain English.

Plain English Campaign

PO Box 3, New Mills, High Peak SK22 4QP

Phone: 01663 744409

Fax: 01663 747038

Website: www.plainenglish.co.uk/

RNIB (Royal National Institute for the Blind)

RNIB publish information on making written material accessible for people with sight problems.

224 Great Portland St, London W1N 6AA

Phone: 020 7388 1266

E-mail: rnib@rnib.org.uk

Website: www.rnib.org.uk

Further reading

For details of publications from the National Centre for Volunteering call Anna Mentzel, Marketing assistant on 020 7520 8936 or go to www.volunteering.org.uk

The Right Stuff: new ways of thinking about managing volunteers

Meta Zimmeck, 2001, £5

A report exploring creative ways of managing volunteering which will encourage debate about the relative merits of bureaucratic and more informal management styles.

The Route to Opportunity series:

Volunteering by people with disabilities; Volunteering by young people; Volunteering by unemployed people; Volunteering by black people; Volunteering by older people

The National Centre for Volunteering, 1996, £5 each, all 5 for £20

Five books looking at how to successfully involve volunteers from different sections of society. Each book sets out the relevant issues, identifies examples of successful practice and lists advice for organisations seeking to recruit volunteers.

Safe and Alert

The National Centre for Volunteering, 2000, £10

The ultimate good practice guide for volunteers working safely with vulnerable clients. The revised and updated edition of this best selling book looks at the key issues around safety, including recruitment, safe and effective management and developing effective management policies and procedures. Also features case studies and sample documentation.



This booklet is published as part of Volunteers' Week 2002.
The Volunteers' Week Planning Group is:



**The National Centre for
Volunteering: 020 7520 8900**



**National Association of Volunteer
Bureaux: 0121 633 4555**



**Volunteer Development Scotland:
01786 479 593**



**Volunteer Development Agency:
028 9023 6100**



**Wales Council for Voluntary
Action: 029 2043 1700**



**The Active Community Unit at the
Home Office: 020 7217 8419.**

All the planning group members are membership organisations. To join, phone them on the numbers above.