

Volunteer-friendly words

Summary

This Information Sheet contains a list of suggested words to help volunteer-involving organisations with developing a clear set of vocabulary related to working with volunteers.

The words are grouped into the following topics:

- General policies and documents for working with volunteers
- Recruitment processes
- Volunteer expenses
- Other terms

At the end of each sub-section, you can find a list of relevant resources in Volunteering England's Good Practice Bank. Sources of further information are suggested at the end of this document.

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Introduction

While volunteers are not included in employment legislation, many people are not aware of these subtle differences and sometimes believe that volunteers are like unpaid employees and therefore have the same kind of legal rights as their paid colleagues.

In order to reduce potential confusion or disappointment for volunteers who may expect to enjoy similar legal entitlements to paid staff, we recommend that volunteer policies and other documents should be drafted carefully to avoid using words with hidden connotations or wider meanings related to employment.

Developing a distinct set of phrases to describe a volunteer programme should also help organisations to reduce the potential risk of creating a contractual relationship with volunteers and finding themselves in a situation where a volunteer may be entitled to claim workers' rights, such as entitlement to receive the minimum wage.

General tips

- **Say what you mean:** don't just borrow vocabulary from employment, human resources or work experience policies without making sure it applies to your volunteer programme.
- **Try to re-read everything from the perspective of your volunteers:** using a slightly softer tone or Plain English style may help to make your documents more readable and volunteer-friendly.
- **Remember that using a different vocabulary does not signify placing a different value on the contribution that people make:** however, it should give greater clarity about people's legal rights or responsibilities.

1. General policies and documents for working with volunteers

Words or phrases to consider using:	Instead of:	Why?
Volunteer agreement	Volunteer contract	<p>A volunteer agreement helps both the organisation and its volunteers by making expectations clear. But it is not intended to place binding or contractual obligations on either side.</p> <p>A legal contract, such as an employment contract, will typically be based on key elements, including an outline of work to be done in exchange for payment, (also known as a ‘consideration’), and an intention to form a legally binding agreement. The contract does not need to be a written or signed document, because a contract can be implied or verbally agreed. The payment does not need to be a salary, and so it is possible that volunteers who receive allowances above out-of-pocket expenses or long-term accommodation in exchange for their work would be regarded as being subject to a contract.</p> <p>If a legally binding contract is created, a volunteer may be entitled to claim workers’ rights, such as the minimum wage, or claim ‘unfair dismissal’ via an employment tribunal or similar body. Therefore, it is advisable to avoid using the term “contract” where there is no intention to make a legally enforceable arrangement.</p>
Volunteer role or task description and Personal qualities or skills	Volunteer job description and Person specification	<p>A volunteer role description can be useful for detailing the specific activities that a particular volunteer is involved in, or for organising a list of tasks that a volunteer could fulfil.</p> <p>Avoiding terms which are commonly associated with employment, such as ‘job’ or ‘person specification’, can help to reduce potential confusion about whether a position is intended as formal employment or as a volunteer role.</p>
Problem-solving procedure or Complaints procedure or Raising concerns policy	Grievance and Disciplinary procedure	<p>Grievance and disciplinary policies for paid staff will often outline statutory or formal conditions related to notice and dismissal periods, which do not apply to volunteers. Using a different title, such as the suggestions in the first column, should help to differentiate a policy intended for volunteers from one intended for paid staff.</p> <p>Such titles also emphasise that the volunteer-involving organisation aims to find the most appropriate solution to problems that occur, whether raised by or about a volunteer.</p> <p>Using a different tone or vocabulary within the document will also help to make a distinction between staff and volunteer policies, so try to avoid using words such as ‘terminate’ or ‘dismissal’ in your policy for volunteers.</p>

Reasonable expectations	Rights and responsibilities (typically used in old versions of volunteer agreements and charters)	<p>There is no clear set of legal rights for volunteers in the UK. Volunteers have some rights as citizens, such as the right for others to take reasonable care of their safety or the right for their personal data to be used and stored appropriately.</p> <p>But volunteers do not have any legal entitlement to the types of rights enjoyed by paid employees. Therefore it is misleading to suggest that volunteers have formal rights to receive expenses or support and supervision.</p> <p>It can also be unfair to suggest that volunteers have a formal 'right to complain' or a 'right to be treated fairly', when employment laws and anti-discrimination laws do not legally apply to them.</p> <p>It is therefore advisable to use caution when referring to rights of volunteers.</p>
We are committed to working with volunteers from a diverse range of backgrounds.	We are an equal opportunities employer	<p>The UK's anti-discrimination laws cover gender, disability, race, sexual orientation, age and religion or belief but only apply to employment under a contract.</p> <p>The laws therefore do not apply to volunteers who are not engaged under a legally enforceable contract (for further explanation, please refer to the section above about volunteer agreements and contracts).</p> <p>Volunteer-involving organisations should still strive to involve a diverse range of volunteers. But this inclusive approach will be based on the organisation's philosophical commitment to good practice, rather than on legal obligations.</p>

Further information

Good Practice Bank Themes

- Volunteer Policies and Agreements
- Creating Volunteer Roles
- Dealing with Problems, Disputes and Complaints
- Equal Opportunities and Diversity

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice>

2. Recruitment processes

Words or phrases to consider using:	Instead of:	Why?
Informal chat or Informal interview	Interview	'Interviews' are usually associated with seeking paid work and can be a daunting prospect. Using terms such as 'informal interview' or 'informal chat' should help to put potential volunteers at ease and emphasise that this is an equal opportunity for both the applicant and the organisation to find out more about each other.
Introductory period	Trial period or Probationary period	For many types of volunteer role, supervisors or volunteer managers may find it useful to set an initial period for assessing how well a new volunteer settles into their role. The term 'introductory period' may seem less intimidating to new volunteers, because it emphasises that the volunteer and organisation are both learning to work together. Avoiding words which are commonly associated with employment contracts, such as 'trial period' or 'probationary period', can also help to reduce potential confusion about whether a position is intended to be a paid job or a volunteer role.
Criminal Records Bureau Disclosure	CRB check	The term 'CRB check' can be used to describe a process undertaken by the Criminal Records Bureau to gather information about a person's criminal convictions and other cautions, reprimands and final warnings given by the Police. The results of this checking process are printed on a document which is officially known as a 'Disclosure'.

Further information

Good Practice Bank Themes

- Recruitment
- Induction and Training
- Protection and Safeguarding

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice>

3. Volunteer expenses

Words or phrases to consider using:	Instead of:	Why?
Out-of-pocket expenses	Subsistence allowance	<p>Expenses or subsistence payments that exceed a volunteer's actual costs may be regarded as a payment given in return for the work they have carried out.</p> <p>This could be regarded as one factor in establishing a contractual relationship, potentially giving the volunteers the same rights as workers or employees – including the national minimum wage. This would usually be decided by an employment tribunal, national minimum wage inspectorate or similar body. (This is a complex issue. For more information please refer to the guidance mentioned at the end of this document.)</p>
<p>Volunteer expenses are reimbursed</p> <p>or</p> <p>We can cover volunteer expenses</p>	We will pay volunteer expenses	For the reasons explained above, using words such as 'reimburse' or 'cover' can be a useful way of emphasising that volunteer out-of-pocket expenses are not intended as a payment.
<p>Thank you gift</p> <p>(for example: for outstanding contribution or long service etc)</p>	Honoraria or Honorarium	An honorarium should be a genuine one-off 'thank you' payment. If it is expected, hinted at or regularly given, it would be treated as any other taxable income. However, some community groups use the word 'honoraria' to describe regular payments given to people who hold local positions of office or responsibility. It may be better to avoid using this word, because of the range of meanings associated with it.

Further information

Good Practice Bank Themes

- Expenses and State Benefits
- Reward, Recognition and Retention

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice>

4. Other terms

Words or phrases to consider using:	Instead of:	Why?
Volunteering opportunity	Placement or Vacancy	<p>The word 'placement' is typically associated with a fixed period of work experience. Generally speaking, placements are mandatory elements of a formal arrangement, such as a course of study or a state benefits claim. In other situations, using the word 'placement' when referring to volunteering could possibly seem contractual by implying that the participant is expected to commit to working for a particular duration or that the organisation agrees to provide work for that length of time.</p> <p>The word 'vacancy' is typically associated with paid employment. Avoiding words which are commonly associated with employment contracts can help to reduce potential confusion about whether a role is intended to be a paid job or an unpaid volunteer role.</p>
Volunteer	Voluntary worker	<p>In everyday terms, "voluntary worker" could be understood to mean a person who works on a voluntary basis.</p> <p>However, there is a specific section of the National Minimum Wage Act which refers to "voluntary workers" as a type of contracted worker who is exempt from qualifying for the minimum wage.</p> <p>The exemption (known as section 44) says that "voluntary workers" must work for a charity, voluntary organisation, associated fund raising body or statutory body.</p> <p>"Voluntary workers" do not receive a salary, and the benefits in kind and expenses they can receive are limited. These conditions of the exemption must be met to ensure that the "voluntary worker" does not qualify for the minimum wage.</p> <p>It is therefore better to avoid using the term "voluntary worker" unless you are referring to a worker who is engaged under this exemption to the National Minimum Wage Act.</p>
Motivations	Incentives	<p>People can have a multitude of personal motivations for volunteering, such as wishing to gain experience, learn new skills or meet new people.</p> <p>Many volunteer-involving organisations try to match these motivating factors by creating interesting or innovative volunteer roles and by offering to accredit a volunteers' learning through use of certificates, accreditation schemes or personal references.</p> <p>Volunteer-involving organisations may also use a range of subtle ways to reward or encourage volunteers, such as arranging thank you parties or giving cards or small gifts.</p> <p>However, an organisation should be cautious if it seeks to directly 'incentivise' volunteering by directly promising a tangible reward or perk, such as a cash payment, voucher or discount, in order to recruit new volunteers.</p>

		<p>A legal contract, such as an employment contract, will typically be based on key elements, including exchange of payment, (also known as a 'consideration'), and an intention to form a legally binding agreement. The contract does not need to be a written or signed document, because a contract can be implied or verbally agreed. The payment does not need to be a salary, and so it is possible that volunteers who are promised valuable rewards in exchange for their work and in advance of starting work for an organisation could be regarded as being subject to a contract.</p>
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Further information

Good Practice Bank Themes

- Legal Issues and Volunteering
- Reward, Recognition and Retention

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice>

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Further information

Business Link website

Guide to the National Minimum Wage Act and how expenses for volunteers or allowances for voluntary workers should be made in compliance with the national minimum wage rules

<http://www.businesslink.gov.uk>

Volunteers and the Law, 2005

A free publication by Volunteering England offering a readable guide to the law

<http://volunteering.org.uk/law>

Last reviewed: November 2009

Disclaimer

We make every effort to ensure that our Information Sheets are correct at the time of publication. They are intended as a brief summary of relevant issues to help you plan or develop your work with volunteers. Legal advice should be sought where appropriate. Volunteering England is unable to accept liability for any loss or damage or inconvenience arising as a consequence of the use of this information.

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<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/aboutsite.htm>

For more information on managing volunteers, please visit

The Good Practice Bank at www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice

A full list of Volunteering England's Information Sheets is available at:

www.volunteering.org.uk/information sheets