
Developing volunteers

This information sheet:

- Explains why it's important to think about volunteer development
- Looks at how to plan this for individual volunteers
- Offers practical suggestions for forms of development
- Includes a template volunteer development plan

Why think about volunteer development?

Some volunteers will be happy to come in and carry out the same tasks week in and week out for years. But others may need a fresh challenge, or will have specific aims that they want to achieve through their volunteering. If you don't take this into account your volunteers may end up leaving before they otherwise might, or at the very least will not be giving as much time and effort as they could.

For many people the benefits that volunteering can bring around work experience, confidence building, learning new skills and trying new things are exactly what they're looking for, so it makes sense to highlight and enhance these aspects where appropriate.

Ultimately the more you put into volunteering, the more you will get out of it.

What does development mean?

Development is really a subset of a wider good practice issue – being aware of volunteer motivations. People have a range of reasons for volunteering. If these are being met they are more likely to stay with you, and commit fully to the work they do.

Sometimes development can be an immediately obvious motivation – the young person looking for valuable work experience, the person wanting to regain confidence lost through mental health problems. But don't neglect people without specific aims from their voluntary work. They may still benefit from a role that evolves, or opportunities to learn and do more.

Talking to volunteers

At recruitment stage you should be asking what the person is hoping to achieve by volunteering. This has immediate consequences – if you realise that the person will not get this from the role you have to offer you wouldn't be doing them any favours by taking them on. You could however suggest an alternative role in your organisation, or amend the current one to better suit them.

At this point you can also think about the person's development needs, and how you might meet them. See below on creating a development plan.

You should also be talking to volunteers on an ongoing basis. This ensures you'll be aware when volunteers are starting to get bored with their current tasks, need a fresh challenge, or have new aims that could be achieved through volunteering.

A development plan

The idea of a development plan sounds bureaucratic, overly formal, not very 'volunteering'. However this is just a way of recording what development needs an individual has and how and when you will meet them - it could simply be a checklist of tasks you will give the volunteer over the course of a few months. A template for a simple development plan can be found at the end of the information sheet.

As an example, a person might be volunteering because they believe it will help with their recovery from social anxiety disorder. On talking to them as part of the recruitment process you discuss what they might find difficult. You take some tasks out of their role description for now, until they build up their confidence. The development plan for this volunteer might be to gradually introduce these tasks, while giving them support to handle issues that they find difficult.

Ongoing training

Volunteers obviously need to be trained to carry out their role, but there is no reason for training to stop there. Opportunities for ongoing learning mean volunteers have the chance to grow and develop. This doesn't have to be whole day training courses – you could run short workshops as part of a volunteer meeting for example.

Training must be relevant to the role however. Training that is merely offered as a perk and not to support or develop what the volunteer is doing could affect the legal status of the volunteer, giving them access to some employment rights. Ask the Volunteer Centre if you want to know more about this issue.

New roles

Although much can often be done within a role to develop a volunteer, sometimes a change of role might be more appropriate. It's hard to be flexible with the tasks that make up some volunteer positions. For example, the particular duties of a volunteer greeter in a museum – being a welcoming face, directing visitors, answering basic questions – don't allow for much leeway. Yet such a volunteer might need fresh challenges, or the aims and motivations which initially attracted them to the role may have changed. Offering a different voluntary position in the organisation could be a solution.

This is one of many good reasons for keeping volunteers informed about the work of the organisation in general. They should be able to identify other potential roles themselves.

More responsibility

Giving volunteers extra responsibility or more tasks can be a form of both development and recognition. A typical example might be asking a volunteer to 'buddy' new volunteers. Some charity shops have 'keyholder' volunteers, who are trusted to open and close the shop in the absence of the shop manager or other paid staff.

To sound a note of caution, care should be taken not to overburden volunteers with too much work, or responsibility that is either not wanted, or not supported. You should also consider whether it is appropriate to ask the volunteer to carry out a particularly responsible role – is this something that should be carried out by a paid worker?

Accreditation

It may be possible to accredit the work of your volunteers. This would have resource implications – e.g. fees and staff time, but some larger charities do offer this. We have listed some of the main routes to accreditation here, but see also the links in the further information section.

Asdan have discontinued their Community Volunteering Award, but do offer Event Volunteering qualifications up to level 3, employability/key skills qualifications and 'Volunteering Short Courses'.

<http://www.asdan.org.uk/about/your-setting/accrediting-volunteering>

NCFE offer level 1 and 2 awards in Volunteering and a level 1 award in Event Volunteering

<http://www.ncfe.org.uk/>

You could also accredit your training and volunteer involvement through the Open College Network.

<http://www.nocn.org.uk/>

Volunteers moving on

An argument against putting effort into volunteer development could be that you will lose some volunteers as they use their skills and confidence to find work. This is true, but it should be seen as a success, not a drawback. By their nature, volunteers come and go. If they leave having had a good experience they will tell friends and family – good word of mouth is a valuable recruitment tool. In addition they may still wish to support your organisation in future, through donations or one-off/occasional volunteering.

Further information

Sport England's guidance on developing key skills is of interest to any volunteer setting, especially smaller organisations where volunteers are needed to cover key roles:

<http://www.sportenglandclubmatters.com/developing-volunteers/>

Volunteer Now are the Northern Irish national volunteer support agency. They've produced information on developing an accredited training programme for volunteers:

<http://www.volunteernow.co.uk/fs/doc/publications/developing-an-accredited-training-programme-for-volunteers-ni.pdf>

They also have a good booklet on volunteer training:

<http://www.volunteernow.co.uk/fs/doc/publications/workbook-4-managing-volunteer-training-2013.pdf>

Volunteer Centre Brighton and Hove's accreditation guidance:

<http://brightonhovevolunteers.org.uk/content/getting-your-training-accredited>

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Volunteer development plan for

Aims:

Activities	Timeline	Done?