
Planning for volunteer involvement

This information sheet explains what you should think about prior to recruiting volunteers into a new role. It assumes that this is not the first time your organisation has worked with volunteers. We shall shortly be producing guidance on starting a volunteer programme from scratch.

This document:

- Explains why it's important to get volunteer involvement right from the start
- Offers guidance on
 - Thinking through what exactly volunteers will be doing
 - Adequately resourcing volunteering
 - Planning for recruitment, training and volunteer support

Why should I devote time to plan volunteer involvement?

Setting aside time in advance will save time further down the road. For example, designing the role properly helps meet your needs and ensure that potential volunteers know what you are looking for and what to expect from volunteering with you. Being ready for volunteer involvement means you won't have to juggle time and make things up on the fly once volunteers have been recruited.

This is not just to make your life easier. If volunteering is poorly planned, and perhaps as a result poorly supported:

- potential volunteers are less likely to get involved, if it isn't clear what you're looking for
- people may be put off by a poor first impression if you're not getting back to enquiries and/or not providing good information about yourselves and the role
- volunteers may be unhappy in their role if it wasn't what they were expecting – or there is too much/too little work for them
- the experience of volunteering might be damaged by a lack of structure or support

What do you want volunteers to do? Will this make a viable volunteer role?

We will produce fuller guidance on writing a volunteer role description. Part of this process though involves thinking through and listing the tasks you'd like volunteers to do.

You should consider whether the role will be worthwhile for both the volunteer and your organisation. Why would someone want to carry it out? Will it be good experience, fun, rewarding, sociable, interesting? This doesn't mean that everything about a role has to be exciting, and some people are happy to come in and just do the photocopying, but the more you are offering people the more likely you are to recruit to the role. There's a danger that volunteer roles end up as a collection of the tasks no one in the office likes doing.

On the other side, what is your organisation getting from the role? There's no point bending over backwards to engage volunteers when the time and resources you are putting into them outweighs any benefit to your organisation.

Putting together a role description will also help you plan for other aspects of the role, such as any resources required, training and induction, and how you will support the volunteers.

Do you have the necessary resources in place for the role?

Volunteers are unpaid but not cost free. There will be resource implications whatever the volunteer role. These could include:

Money – if at all possible you should budget for volunteer expenses. Reimbursing out of pocket expenses such as travel and food makes a real difference to benefits claimants or people on low incomes considering volunteering. There might be other things to spend money on, such as posters or leaflets.

Space – how many volunteers can you reasonably accommodate? For example, could you guarantee that a volunteer coming in every Friday to help with admin would always have a desk free to work at?

Equipment – similarly, what equipment would volunteers need and will there be enough?

Can you keep volunteers and service-users safe?

Any new volunteer role needs to be risk assessed. You should think beyond health and safety issues. Work with young people or vulnerable adults throws up safeguarding issues, or there could be financial or reputational risks to consider. The risk assessment might then shape the role and/or activity if it suggests changes to improve safety.

Appropriate policies and procedures should be in place to manage risk – e.g. a safeguarding policy with associated procedures for dealing with concerns or incidents. You should also make sure that you have adequate insurance cover for any new activities.

Who will be recruiting, training and supporting volunteers? And how will this be done?

One other key resource is staff time. Who will be carrying out these different activities, and do they have the time to do so? So, for example, volunteers might need safeguarding training, which has to be delivered by a particular member of staff. In a larger organisation the person responsible for recruiting volunteers might not be the person who will be working with them on a day to day basis. People supporting volunteering should be aware that this will take up some of their time. Volunteers need to be shown what to do, will need the chance to discuss their work, should be able to ask questions and so on.

The processes for recruitment, training and support need to be thought through and put in place. More information can be found in our forthcoming information sheets on volunteer recruitment and support, but things to consider include:

How you advertise for volunteers? Through the volunteer centre, on your website, through posters and leaflets? Thinking through the role might help you target potential volunteers – e.g. fashion students for a role dressing the window of a charity shop.

What information you will provide for people interested in volunteering? A role description, background information on your organisation and/or specific project, a volunteer handbook?

Responding to enquiries. How will you make sure that potential volunteers hear back from you in good time? This might mean preparing application packs, ensuring people who answer the phone know what to do with enquiries, keeping some time free for volunteer interviews.

The process. Will you use application forms or simply invite volunteers in for a chat? How will you select volunteers?

And for support:

How will you welcome volunteers into the organisation? What information will you need to give volunteers, and how? This can range from introducing them to staff members and volunteers, to what to do when the fire alarm goes off and how the organisation is run.

What training will be needed? A lot of volunteer training is on-the-job training – showing someone how to carry out a task and supporting them until they are

confident in what they are doing. In some cases more formal training might be necessary. What is needed and who will deliver it?

What kind of support will be appropriate? This will very much depend on the role, but could include informal catch-ups or regular supervision meetings. You could also have experienced volunteers acting as 'buddies' for new volunteers.

How will you pass on information and get feedback from volunteers? Volunteer meetings? Newsletters? Noticeboards?

You should also consider support for anyone who will be working with and supporting volunteers so that they know what's expected of them, and how they should be treating volunteers. This is often overlooked, as if line-managing volunteers needed less time, skill and support than line-managing paid staff.

Further information:

Volunteer Centre Bexley Information Sheets:

Starting a volunteer programme

Creating a volunteer role

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