

Supporting volunteers

“Volunteers want to feel welcome, secure, respected, informed, well-used and well-managed.”

A Choice Blend, Institute for Volunteering Research, 2004

It is important to provide adequate support for volunteers. As with paid staff they need the chance to give and receive feedback, to be able to ask questions and be given the right information, guidance and training they need to carry out their tasks. But good volunteer involvement should aspire to more than satisfying yourself that volunteers know what they are doing and receive help where needed (although this is a solid base). The above quote comes from research into volunteers’ experiences of volunteering, specifically what put people off volunteering, or conversely helped engage them more fully. It suggests that what we should be doing is working towards a volunteer-friendly culture within our organisations. Therefore this information sheet looks beyond direct forms of volunteer support and supervision to creating a supportive environment for volunteering.

This information sheet:

- Describes different ways of providing direct support for volunteers
- Gives some additional forms of support such as buddying
- Suggests forms of recognising volunteers
- Gives tips for creating a volunteer-friendly culture

Direct support for volunteers

It’s important to find a way of giving and getting feedback from volunteers about their role. How you do so will vary according to resources and how volunteers are involved. For example, it wouldn’t make sense to arrange monthly mid-week supervision meetings for volunteers who take part in Sunday drop-in activities on a nature reserve.

Supervision meetings

Supervision meetings are regularly scheduled opportunities to discuss the volunteer’s work and how they feel they are doing. You may consider using a different name – ‘supervision’ sounds quite formal, and some people may worry that it is along the lines of an appraisal.

The point of the meetings should be an opportunity for both you and the volunteer to talk about their work and their role, give feedback, and discuss training/support needs.

They should be held regularly so that volunteers know they have the chance to raise concerns or talk about issues that they might not wish to discuss in casual conversations.

Informal catch-ups

Formal meetings are not always appropriate, but it's still important to find ways of getting and giving feedback. Informal catch-ups can be fitted around your situation. For example, if you're supervising conservation volunteers on a nature reserve on a weekend you wouldn't want to invite them in for an hour on a Tuesday morning for a supervision meeting, but you might make sure to spend time alongside each volunteer as part of the activity, perhaps sharing a task, to check that they are happy with what they are doing.

Group supervision

Group supervision sessions, like the name suggests, are supervision sessions for several people at once. Each volunteer gets some uninterrupted time to talk through what they have been doing, raise issues and so on, but there is also the chance for group discussion.

There are pros and cons with this method. It can save time – e.g. seeing 6 volunteers over a couple of hours rather than perhaps 6 separate hour long meetings. It can also be a useful learning experience. Volunteers can discuss issues they've faced, generate solutions and learn from each other. On the other hand, some people may be less likely to raise concerns or problems in a group setting. You would need to make it clear that you can be approached outside the meeting to talk through any sensitive issues.

Telephone/Skype meetings

For volunteers working off-site telephone or Skype meetings can work well – although it can sometimes still be beneficial to invite the volunteer in for a face-to-face meeting every so often. This is as much to prevent the volunteer feeling too isolated, and give them a sense of being part of the organisation as it is any shortcomings of telephone contact.

How should we run a supervision meeting?

This is a rough structure that you can use for supervision meetings. It will also be helpful for other forms of individual feedback. You may wish to turn it into a simple form for volunteers, to help focus the mind in advance of a meeting.

- Action points from last time
- What has the volunteer been doing since the last meeting?
- What's gone well? What hasn't?

This is also a chance for the volunteer supervisor to talk about the volunteer's work, and raise any minor problems or issues. Please do remember to give positive as well as negative feedback!

- What help or support does the volunteer need?
- Development/motivation

Such meetings can be used to gauge whether the volunteer is still getting what they were looking for from volunteering; they may benefit from a minor change in their tasks or a fresh challenge

- Action points for next time

What other forms of support could we provide?

Buddying/peer support

Buddying can be a good complement to top-down support. It means asking longer term volunteers to support new volunteers. They act as a friendly face, and are there to answer basic questions and help people integrate into the organisation. No matter how approachable volunteer supervisors make themselves it can be easier for people to ask questions of other volunteers.

It is also a good way of recognising the work and commitment of longer term volunteers.

Volunteer meetings

Volunteer meetings are an opportunity for volunteers to meet together and talk about issues that affect them. They can also be useful for communication, learning and consultation. You can inform volunteers about organisational news, or ask for opinions on possible changes.

It can help to have a focus to the meetings. This could be workshops, talks on relevant topics (especially from outside speakers), or simply a fun element to them.

Ongoing training and development

A commitment to developing volunteers shows how much you value volunteering – and indeed enhances the skills and work of your volunteer workforce. See our information sheet *Developing Volunteers* for more information.

Volunteer newsletters

For larger organisations these can be a useful tool for keeping in touch with volunteers and ensuring important news gets passed on to them. If you are using email newsletters do remember that not all volunteers may use email, so do provide paper copies where needed.

Social media

You could consider a Facebook group or similar social media platform for volunteers. This will allow volunteers to share experiences and interact socially. It would be sensible for this to be private (i.e. not visible by the general public) and monitored/moderated.

Volunteer recognition/appreciation

It's important to find ways of thanking volunteers, both individually and collectively. There are formal and informal means of recognising the contribution volunteers make to an organisation, and it's sensible to use a variety of both. Different volunteers will appreciate different forms of appreciation. There are some suggestions below, but don't limit yourself to them – be creative!

Informal recognition:

- A 'thank-you'. Saying thank you at the end of the day is as much as most people are looking for
- Birthday cards
- Asking an opinion. Formal consultations are of course important, but simply asking a volunteer what they think about an issue shows you value their insight and experience
- Time and attention – show an interest in volunteers (and not just in their work)
- Reference to volunteer involvement in relevant talks and articles, especially those by senior managers

Formal recognition:

- Volunteer certificates
- Volunteer celebrations (e.g. as part of Volunteers Week)
- Christmas dinner
- Volunteer awards
- Long service awards or markers
- Explicit recognition of volunteering in documents such as the annual report.

Cultivating a volunteer-friendly internal culture

Formal support for volunteering is often driven by one or two people internally. For volunteering to truly thrive there needs to be an organisational commitment – a volunteer-friendly internal culture. It's hard to define this - one way to describe it is that volunteers are completely integrated into the organisation and treated with the same care that any other resource would be.

Here are indicators that this has been achieved:

Senior Managers understand volunteering

This can be a challenge for volunteer managers, especially in larger organisations. Senior managers make key decisions that could impact on volunteers; if they lack understanding of volunteering they could negatively impact on volunteer involvement.

Senior managers showing an interest in volunteering also sets the tone for the rest of the organisation.

Volunteers included in discussions and activities

This is hard to engineer, but a sign that things are working well: when it becomes natural for volunteers to be included in informal discussions or activities. This can be helped along by making sure that volunteers are included in formal activities such as staff meetings and AGMs.

Volunteers are listened to

Volunteers should be given a voice – that is, there are opportunities to give collective feedback. This can be through volunteer meetings, consultations, working groups or volunteer champions at board level.

In a truly volunteer-friendly culture it would be normal for staff to informally ask volunteers' opinions about work related issues.

Volunteers are considered

That is, when decisions are made the impact on volunteering is taken into account. When funding is applied for that includes volunteer involvement this includes provision for expenses and other costs. When volunteers turn up for their regular shift someone has made sure that there is work for them to do.

Staff understand volunteering

While it is obviously important to support staff who will be directly supervising volunteers, all staff should be aware of the overall role of volunteers within the organisation, and how their own role in particular relates to them. Volunteering awareness could form part of induction for example.

Further information:

Volunteer Centre Bexley Information Sheets

Developing volunteers

Dealing with problems

NCVO guidance on volunteer supervision:

<https://knowhownonprofit.org/people/volunteers/keeping/supporting-volunteers>

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