Writing a volunteer policy

A volunteer policy sets out how your organisation will recruit, involve and support volunteers. In a sense it is the cornerstone of your volunteer involvement. This means it is worth putting some thought into creating or revising one – they need to be a living document rather than something to have in place to satisfy a checklist of policies and procedures.

This information sheet covers:

- Why you need a volunteer policy
- The process of creating a policy
- What should be in your volunteer policy
- Accessibility

It also includes a framework for a policy, with questions to help you write your own.

Why do we need a volunteer policy?

Some people can be resistant to the idea of having volunteering policies and procedures at all – after all, volunteering is by its nature informal, and many volunteers will say they enjoy volunteering because it is 'not like work'. Although the unique nature of volunteering is important and should not be lost, when done correctly a volunteer policy can be a help, not a hindrance. There are several benefits to having a volunteer policy:

- Policies act as a statement of intent – in and of themselves they demonstrate a commitment to volunteers and volunteering.
- Having policies and procedures in place helps organisations treat volunteers consistently and in line with good practice.
- Policies offer potential and current volunteers a degree of security. They show that the organisation has put thought into volunteer involvement, and gives an overview of how volunteers can expect to be treated.
- A volunteer policy sets out the overall role of volunteers in the organisation. This is something paid staff, management, trustees, service users and volunteers themselves can be confused about.
- From a volunteer's point of view a volunteer policy should be almost invisible on a day to day level. It's there to help things run smoothly, not add an extra layer of bureaucracy.

How do we create a policy?

You may wish to set up a working group within the organisation to oversee the creation of the volunteer policy. This can be useful particularly for getting organisational buy-in and ownership of volunteer involvement – after all, even the best written volunteer policy cannot overcome the kind of difficulties that may arise within an organisation that does not understand or support volunteering.

Another scenario where the working group can help is where volunteers are suspicious of change and policies and procedures being imposed. This can particularly arise where there are a number of volunteers who have been involved for a long time. By involving volunteers in the process you can show them that the policy and related procedures are not intended to bind volunteers in red tape. Additionally it's worth emphasising that while current volunteers may feel settled and not in need of written documents, newer volunteers won't have their security of experience.

What should a policy look like?

Some organisations choose to have long policies that go into each topic in full detail. This can be perfectly fine, but in general it is better for policies to be shorter, summarising and signposting to separate policies and procedures where appropriate. This keeps the policy simple and readable. So for example, the policy might explain your organisation's commitment to equal opportunities and its expectation that volunteers will behave accordingly, rather than reproduce an entire equal opportunities policy.

There may be a tension between wanting to have a straightforward document and a longer guide for employees charged with supervising or working with volunteers. Where this becomes a problem you may decide to have 2 separate documents, one for volunteers and one for staff members.

The framework at the end of the information sheet covers the core topics that most organisations are likely to need in their policy. Do not feel that you cannot add to it or use a completely different structure. The policy has to meet the needs of your organisation and its volunteering programme.

Accessibility

As with any document aimed at volunteers there are some simple steps that will help make the document accessible to a wide range of people, from those with poor English to those with a range of disabilities.

Plain English – you want volunteers to read and understand the policy. Keep it simple and straightforward. None of us enjoy reading dry documents written in legalistic overly formal language

Readable font – a sans serif font such as Arial, 12 point or above. Several organisations, from Mencap to RNIB suggest this as being more accessible to their service users.

Discuss the policy's contents as part of induction – this means that you can be sure that volunteers have and understand the information you believe they need. This is particularly important in areas such as health and safety, equal opportunities and safeguarding.

Be flexible – you may need to provide a large print copy, or record a spoken version of the text into an mp3 file for example. Be open to such adjustments, within reason.

Reviewing the policy

It makes sense to look over the policy annually. Experience might suggest improvements, or there may have been changes to your organisation or volunteer involvement. The Policy has to remain a living document.

Further information

NCVO's *Knowhow Nonprofit* page on volunteer policies:

https://knowhownonprofit.org/people/volunteers/keeping/policy

Volunteer Now's Volunteer Policy Framework:

volunteerpolicyframeworkvolunteernow

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Volunteer policy framework

This framework sets out the structure of a volunteer policy with questions and/or notes to help guide your writing of the content. Do by all means look at policies used by other organisations (an internet search will bring up several), but we encourage you to avoid cutting and pasting – the policy needs to fit your organisation and its needs, and writing the policy is in itself a useful exercise in thinking through how you will involve volunteers.

Introduction
Why are you involving volunteers?
What does your organisation do and how do volunteers contribute to this?
What values underpin your volunteer involvement?

The introduction is a good place to set out some basic principles. You can explain the overall role of volunteers within your organisation, and your commitment to good practice. You might also think about ethical principles too. What kind of roles are appropriate for volunteers in your organisation?

Recruitment
What will be the process for creating a volunteer role?
How will you advertise roles?
How will the recruitment process work?

These will obviously differ depending on the size and structure of your organisation and the nature of your volunteering. In a larger body you might have a process that a member of staff goes through before recruiting volunteers to ensure that the role is appropriate for voluntary workers, resources are in place, and so on.

What will the recruitment process be – will you use application forms? Would group recruitment be an option for some roles? Will you offer a taster period (a less scary term than trial period)?

You may need a separate recruitment procedure that you summarise and signpost to.

Induction/training
How will you introduce volunteers to the organisation?
How will you train them?

A good tool for induction is an induction checklist – that way you can be sure that each volunteer is given the information you want them to have when they start. The first question is carefully worded – induction is not just about making sure a new volunteer can carry out the role and has been told where the fire exits are. The first few weeks of volunteering are an important time – making volunteers feel at home within the organisation

and understand how it works formally and informally are as important as on-the-job training.

Expenses
How will you reimburse expenses?

Not all organisations can afford to reimburse volunteer expenses, but if you can it does mean that they won't be out of pocket through volunteering. This can be significant to people on benefits or a low income.

If you can reimburse you should set out what you will reimburse – travel? Food costs (remembering HMRC benefits in kind limits)? - and how this process will work. For the latter you may wish to signpost to a separate procedure or a section of a volunteer handbook.

Supervision/Support
How will you supervise volunteers?
What other means of support and/or communication will you have in place?

All volunteers should have a named supervisor, someone they can go to with questions or concerns. Beyond this you should set out what you will do to ensure volunteers have the chance for individual and collective feedback. This could be regular supervision meetings, group supervision, telephone/skype catch ups, volunteer meetings etc.

Insurance

Let volunteers know that they are insured, and for what – usually this will be under employers/public liability, which covers them in the event of their coming to harm through the fault of the organisation. Some organisations also have personal accident insurance, which covers them in the event of an accident where no one is at fault.

Equal opportunities and Diversity
What are the values you want to get across?

You'll have a separate organisational policy for this, but it's good to spell out how it applies to volunteering. This will encompass both your approach to volunteers and your expectations of their behaviour.

Health and Safety

Generally this section would summarise and signpost to the main Health and Safety policy.

Dealing with problems
What will you do when things go wrong?

Again, it makes sense to have a separate procedure for this unless you are a small informal organisation and can set out a brief procedure here. It's worth saying that hopefully most issues can be dealt with informally, encouraging people to raise small concerns with their supervisor, but it's good to have a formal procedure to fall back on.

Other issues
You may wish to include other issues such as confidentiality or safeguarding if they are relevant to your organisation.