

Introduction to Volunteering

Making the Decision and Getting it Right

Making the decision about whether or not to involve volunteers is a complex process and you will need to consider a number of issues. The first question is, "Do we need volunteers and why?" Only when this point has been resolved can you move forward to look at the wider issues.

1. What are the costs and resource implications associated with involving volunteers and can your organisation meet these?

Volunteers should not be seen a cheap alternative. This is negative and implies volunteers are a second choice. The 'duty of care' an organisation has to its client/user group also applies to volunteers. If you aim to give a good quality service, you will need well-trained, adequately-resourced staff and volunteers.

The following implications need to be considered before any decision is taken on involving volunteers. These should be the minimum requirements:

- The time and effort required to produce sound volunteering policies
- Staff (employing a volunteer manager, training existing staff etc.)
- Selection (administration, postage, interviews and references)
- Identification of appropriate roles for volunteers, written task description, written
- Rights and responsibilities statement and volunteer agreements.
- Recruitment (publicity – posters, leaflets, advertising)
- Training (trainers, room hire, equipment and refreshments)
- Health & Safety (policies and procedures, training)
- Insurance (check with your insurers whether volunteers are covered)
- Volunteers' Expenses (travel costs, refreshments, phone calls and childcare)
- Support (supervision, induction packs, setting up support networks/groups)
- Many volunteer roles will also call for more detailed selection procedures (e.g. police checks and child protection checks)

This InfoSheet series looks at all of these issues in more detail.

2. How will volunteer involvement affect your purpose, aims and objectives, values and ethos and what roles should volunteers have within your organisation?

Benefit to your organisation and client/user group needs to be ensured as does providing volunteers with a valuable experience. Volunteers should be complimentary to your organisation and should bring real benefits. Issues around ethics, professionalism, roles and responsibilities, volunteer tasks and boundaries, need to be discussed, defined and agreed upon. In addition, you will need to ensure you have plenty to offer volunteers in terms of interesting roles and opportunities for personal development backed up by support, supervision and relevant training. Benefits to volunteers may also be broader, for example, promoting social inclusion and community involvement and participation.

You could carry out a group exercise where you together consider:

- The needs of your organisation, in order of priority
- The needs of your client / user group, in order of priority
- The needs of potential volunteers, in order of priority

If these needs appear to be in conflict, you will need to consider if and how problems can be overcome before going ahead with your volunteering project

Volunteers shouldn't replace paid staff and shouldn't carry out tasks usually done by employees; their involvement also shouldn't compromise service delivery. For example, if your organisation offers counselling from highly trained staff, it would be inappropriate to involve volunteers with far less training, unless you intend a different role for them that will be complimentary to your main service area. The role needs to benefit to the service user as well as the volunteer. If asked to do the tasks of paid staff, volunteers may feel pressured or "emotionally persuaded". This may lead to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, anxiousness and stress, especially if, for example, the work involves dealing with vulnerable people.

Set 3 of this InfoSheet series looks at volunteer roles in more detail and has guidelines on when it may and may not be appropriate to use volunteers.

3. What mechanisms do you have for consulting with paid staff, service users and other 'stakeholders' who have an interest in your organisation?

Firstly you will need to have the agreement of your board of trustees or senior management team before involving volunteers. Consider how you will approach them and how you will put your case.

Secondly, you need to find out how paid staff feel about the involvement of volunteers. You could carry out a consultation exercise, perhaps in a team meeting, to explore how staff feel. Be honest and clear about why you wish to involve volunteers and explore together any impact on working arrangements. Staff may feel more positive if they feel that volunteers are not a threat. You should have a named member of staff to act as a point of contact and support for volunteers. It is essential that this person really wants to take on this new role and is provided with adequate training.

If areas of conflict arise with paid staff once volunteers are involved, how can they be resolved? You will need to consider what mechanisms you will have in place and who will take responsibility for problem solving.

Finally, you need to find out how do your service users feel about the involvement of volunteers in your organisation? Consider how you will consult and involve them and how you will introduce your ideas about involving volunteers in your work.

Above all, there needs to be staff and service user agreement regarding involving volunteers. Involving volunteers where there is serious conflict may well produce adverse consequences for the organisation and its clients/users.

5. How will volunteers be recruited, selected, trained and supported? How can this be undertaken and who will do it effectively, ensuring you reach volunteers from diverse backgrounds?

You may want to consider whether volunteers need any previous experience or existing skills. You should aim to be as inclusive as possible, thinking about what would be the minimum level of skills/experience needed and whether you could provide training to allow volunteers to meet your criteria. To clarify what is needed you may wish to draw up a 'person specification' for each of the identified roles. You should also try to ensure that you are reaching a diverse section of your local population.

Set 2 of this InfoSheet series looks at diversity, recruitment, selection, and training in more detail.

You need to be aware of the pressures volunteers might face and offer clear support mechanisms to enable them to deal with any difficulties they may encounter. Volunteers need to be provided with a means to seek support and this role should ideally fall to a paid member of staff who has agreed to do it, understands it fully and has the necessary training and management support to carry it out.

Set 3 and Set 4 of this InfoSheet series looks at management and support in more detail.

6. How will you involve volunteers in the life of your organisation?

Volunteers have the right to a 'voice' within the organisation and, as such, they should be enabled to contribute to the decision and policy-making process. Moreover, volunteers need to be aware of these processes and they should be encouraged to take part accordingly. This is particularly relevant if a volunteer is, or has been, a service user of the organisation, as they will have insight into the level and quality of service provided. Consider what mechanisms you can put in place to ensure that volunteers are consulted and their opinions sought.

InfoSheet 3.9 deals with volunteer consultation and involvement in more detail.

7. How will you ensure your volunteers receive appropriate support and supervision and how will you retain them?

Supervision and/or volunteer support sessions provide a useful arena for informing volunteers of the contribution they can make to the organisation. You will need to show your appreciation on a regular basis and show that you value the contribution of your volunteers if you want to keep them coming back. Some roles may need closer support and supervision, for example, if a volunteer is supporting a service user with emotional needs. Supervision sessions should be as informal as possible and structured in such a way to allow the volunteer to talk about his or her feelings about the placement openly and to raise any problems or areas of conflict. It is a good idea to offer supervision to volunteers on a regular basis, letting them know that they can also approach you for support as and when necessary. It is a good idea to have a named contact person for this, who will be a paid member of staff.

Set 3 & Set 4 of this InfoSheet series deals with volunteer management and support in more detail.