

Set 2

Recruitment and Selection

Vetting Procedures

Vetting procedures such as CRB checks and Child Protection Checks can be useful to carry out if volunteers are going to be working directly with children, young people or vulnerable adults. Indeed, they are mandatory for most Local Authority Social Service's Volunteers. However, there is a danger of over-reliance on them as a single method of vetting and they are not appropriate for the vast majority of volunteer placements.

References

Taking up references on potential volunteers is assumed to be good practice. This, however, need not be the case and many voluntary projects and community groups, especially if they are 'volunteer led', do not regard references as necessary. The critical issue here concerns the benefit of references and how they might assist in the assessment of a potential volunteer's suitability. References can provide additional information on a volunteer and they may also be seen as a means of protecting an organisation. Insurers for example may insist on references as part of the organisation's duty of care. Council services and services funded by the Council will almost certainly need to take up references on potential volunteers.

However, the limitations of references should be recognised, they are simply the views of another person and as such their accuracy and detail is limited. A referee may not have the appropriate knowledge of the volunteer's background, or not wish to reveal certain information. With this in mind, referees should be informed that any information disclosed by them may be discussed between the organisation and person volunteering.

Therefore, if an organisation does decide to ask for references on potential volunteers, it needs to be clear regarding the reasons why and exactly how it will use the information. In certain circumstances, the details given in a reference could act as the focal point for discussion and this should certainly be the case if areas of potential difficulty are highlighted. Failing to discuss references which may influence decisions regarding the suitability of prospective volunteers, means that the organisation is not acting responsibly. Volunteers should also be given an indication of the comments made about them on a reference and be offered an opportunity to discuss any relevant issues. If someone's suitability is based solely on a reference, then that person has a right to know why this is the case and be consulted. A negative reference may highlight potential problems but this alone should not prevent a person from doing the type of voluntary work which interests them. Nor should it exclude them from other forms of voluntary activity. By involving potential volunteers in the decision making process at this stage, they may feel more positive about doing voluntary work and the organisation as a whole.

Research indicates that well-planned interviews, thorough induction and support, are an effective means for identifying appropriate volunteers, more so than relying on the comments in a reference. Interviews are important. An effective interview will more accurately gauge the extent to which sensitive issues are likely to actually present a problem, than will a reference.

When to take up references

References can be taken up before a prospective volunteer is interviewed, although it is unlikely the organisation will be aware of the person's particular interests and background.

It may therefore, be more appropriate to wait until after the interview when a reference can be used more to support the information that has been gathered. References should definitely be taken up *before* the volunteer begins their voluntary work, not to do so rather invalidates the point of seeking references and an embarrassing situation could arise.

What to include when asking for a reference

There is no ideal standard format for references as a great deal depends on the kind of work an organisation is involved in. In conjunction with straightforward questions ('How long have you known X?'), it is useful to ask a range of open questions ('What can you tell us about the interests of X?') or more specific ('X will be working as a fund-raiser, are there any concerns/comments you may wish to raise regarding this?'). These offer referees the opportunity to express opinions and raise issues of concern. The person giving a reference also needs to be aware that any details they give may be discussed between the prospective volunteer and the organisation. An important issue regarding information given on references is concerned with knowledge of criminal behaviour. As noted, an open or more specific question enables a referee to express their opinions and give information about someone. The situation could arise whereby details of known criminal behaviour and/or a criminal conviction are disclosed. These must be taken seriously but treated with the utmost caution and investigated further. For example, a referee can have 'the wrong end of the stick', their information may be inaccurate, even vindictive, or similarly, they may present information in a distorted, prejudiced manner. Such a situation could (arguably) be easier to investigate if, say, the referee was acting in a professional capacity (e.g. doctor, probation officer, social worker etc.) but even so, details and information need to be double-checked. Furthermore, irrespective of their status, the referee should never be asked directly to disclose details of criminal convictions.

How to take up references:

Asking for references can be intimidating and may deter people from volunteering. If references are to be taken up, an organisation needs to ensure it explains the reasons why it is doing so and offer support in helping the prospective volunteer to identify suitable referees. Care should be taken not to reinforce the stereotype of the 'professional' as the person best able to judge a prospective volunteer! In general, volunteers can be asked to name two referees; preferably people who have known them well for at least a couple of years, but who are not closely related.

Requesting references:

Ideally, the reference reply form should be sent with a covering letter and a list/description of the proposed duties and activities of the volunteer. A stamped, addressed envelope should always be enclosed.

'Doubtful' references:

Organisations should remember that references indicating any potential problems, such as those noted above, do not necessarily mean a volunteer is unsuitable. The organisation together with the volunteer should, wherever possible, try to explore areas of concern eventually deciding on the best option to pursue. Although it may be uncomfortable, those involved in the interview should not avoid sensitive issues. A person who has had difficulties in the past, has very demanding family commitments or who suffers from other recurrent problems (mental health, for example) may still have much to offer. If, in the final analysis a volunteer is not suitable, the organisation should enable the person to look at the options open to them.

Vetting (Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks)

Volunteers with local authorities, social services, housing or education departments, the probation or health services are likely to undergo stringent vetting procedures, i.e. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Checks. If you are part of the Council or a Council funded service and your volunteers are going to be directly involved with children, young people or vulnerable adults, you will almost certainly have to carry out these checks (as well as Child Protection Checks if the work involves children). This is also the case for volunteers working in childcare for national voluntary organisations. You should not be considering carrying out CRB checks unless the volunteer's role will involve unsupervised contact with young people and children or vulnerable adults. The Criminal Records Bureau has been set up to manage disclosures and you can find out more by looking at the CRB website at www.crb.gov.uk or seeking further advice from the Volunteering Unit.

An alternative approach is for organisations to aim for a policy of self-disclosure. Enabling a volunteer to disclose specific information, during an interview has the advantage of dealing with the issue immediately and hopefully with sensitivity. With police checks there is the danger of over reliance. Studies have shown many offenders are never caught or convicted. Identification too, can be prone to error. CRB checks can be useful to help with selecting volunteers and should not be the crux of the selection process.

Other checks

Organisations may feel it appropriate to a reference and/or report from other professional bodies. Some, for example, fall into line with private sector practices and request doctors reports. There is much to debate here, ethical as well as practical and the effectiveness of such an approach remains open to question.

Bradford Volunteering Unit carries out Child Protection Checks for volunteers who will be working in direct contact with children and young people. These checks are carried out by the Social Services Department on our behalf. If you need advice on Child Protection Checks contact the Volunteering Unit.

This document is based on information from Voluntary Action Leeds.