

Management of Volunteers

Volunteer Rights, Expectations & Agreements

Volunteer Rights

Volunteers have rights, some of which are enshrined in legislation and some of which are the moral obligations of an organisation involving volunteers.

The following list could form the basis of the list of rights you will afford to your volunteers.

As a volunteer you have the right:

- To work in a healthy and safe environment;
- To be interviewed and employed in accordance with equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation;
- To be adequately covered by insurance;
- To be given accurate and truthful information about the organisation for which you are working;
- To be reimbursed for out of pocket expenses incurred on behalf of the organisation for which you are working;
- To be given a copy of the organisation's volunteer policy and any other policy that affects your work;
- Not to fill a position previously held by a paid worker;
- Not to do the work of paid staff during industrial disputes;
- To have a task description and agreed volunteering hours;
- To have access to a grievance procedure;
- To be provided with an induction to the organisation;
- To be provided with adequate supervision and support;
- To have confidential and personal information dealt with in accordance with the principles of the Data Protection Act 1998
- To be provided with sufficient training to do the job.

Volunteer Responsibilities

Volunteers also have responsibilities. The following list might form the basis of your list of volunteers' responsibilities:

It is your responsibility:

- Not to take on more responsibility than you can handle or deviate from your task description.
- To meet time commitments or to provide notice so alternative arrangements can be made.
- To perform the tasks assigned to you to the best of your ability.
- To attend induction training.
- To report any problems to your supervisor
- To follow Child Protection Guidelines (if applicable)
- To follow organisational policies and procedures, including equal opportunities.
- To respect those confidences entrusted to you.
- To be open-minded and respectful towards opinions shared with you.
- To notify the organisation in advance of absences or schedule changes that may affect them.

It is a good idea to set out the above rights and expectations in a form that both you and the volunteer sign.

Volunteer Agreements

'Volunteer Agreements' are written guidelines on mutually agreed undertakings between organisation and volunteer. As with volunteer task descriptions and person specifications, agreements should not be viewed simply as something to have because "...it looks good...". Neither should they be seen as unnecessary bureaucracy, but rather a straightforward document which demonstrates an organisation's commitment to its volunteers. In other words, they are a tool of good management practice. This paper looks at the form a volunteer agreement should take, what to avoid and how it fits in with the overall volunteering management picture.

What should a 'Volunteer Agreement' contain?

Ideally, consisting of no more than two sides of A4, a Volunteer Agreement is a document which makes clear the duties a volunteer will be undertaking, whom they will be supported/supervised by and other 'practical' details. In order to clarify what needs to be included, it may be helpful to use sub-headings, the minimum of which should be:

- Name of volunteer
- Title of voluntary role
- Who the volunteer is responsible to, this may be a volunteer co-ordinator or any member of staff
- Hours and time frame to be kept reasonably flexible, perhaps this is more important in instances where volunteers are responsible for 'set sessions' e.g. for Samaritans, CAB, etc.
- Location / place of work
- Objective, what the volunteer's role is hopefully going to achieve.
- Tasks - A short list or description of the work a volunteer will be doing.
- Brief details of any training volunteers need to attend
- Expenses
- A paragraph outlining policies which apply to volunteers, these include
- Health & Safety, should include Equal Opportunities and Insurance and preferably include Grievance and Disciplinary as well as those policies which may be specific to an organisation, e.g. No Smoking, Probationary Period for volunteers etc. Make it clear that the organisations' policies are there to both protect the volunteer and for them to adhere to.
- Statement saying that the Volunteer Agreement does not constitute a contract of employment (see below for more on this)
- Signatures, ideally, the agreement should be signed by the volunteer and their support worker.

Are there things to be avoided?

Care needs to be taken regarding the reasons and intentions for having such agreements, in particular, the way in which they are worded. The exact nature and wording of the document will differ according to the organisation and the type of work a volunteer is undertaking. What is important, however, is the manner in which a Volunteer Agreement is worded.

First and foremost a Volunteer Agreement should not be viewed as a contract of employment. If it is intended to 'contract' a volunteer to carry out a specific job then that person's status may change from volunteer to employee. This, in turn, can give them full employment rights. It is good practice to regard volunteers as equal to paid workers in terms of equal opportunities, for example. However, having a volunteer making a claim for, say, unfair dismissal on the grounds of race or sex, could be, potentially, ruinous for an organisation.

Secondly, a degree of care needs to be taken over the wording of a Volunteer Agreement. Avoid words like, 'duty', 'expectation', 'contract', 'pay', 'wage', for example, and terminology which infers contractual obligations i.e. that the volunteer is expected to do something in return for something. Volunteer Agreements should carefully set out intentions and express hopes instead of making binding demands. Third, a final point to note, a contract of employment does not have to be written but can be verbal too, so not having Volunteer Agreements does not let you avoid this issue altogether.

So, is it still a good idea to have Volunteer Agreements?

As noted above, a Volunteer Agreement should be viewed as a tool of good overall volunteer management practice. They are an ideal format to ensure that both volunteer and organisation have a mutual understanding of the volunteer's role as well as what support they are to receive. In conclusion, if an organisation goes to the lengths of drawing up job descriptions and person specifications, has induction packs and/or volunteer handbooks, takes up references/checks, provides training, supervision and support, then Volunteer Agreements provide the final touch.

This Infosheet is based on information from Voluntary Action-Leeds