

Management of Volunteers

Volunteers who Work with Children & Vulnerable People

Most volunteers enhance the lives of the clients they work with, but some may not be suited to work with children, young people and vulnerable adults, and a tiny minority may pose a threat. It is important, then, that organisations working with vulnerable clients give consideration to ways in which they can minimise risks and provide a safe environment for clients and volunteers. This InfoSheet has been adapted from Safe involvement of volunteers with vulnerable adults by The National Centre for Volunteering, and aims to give information on the areas to consider when volunteers are working with vulnerable clients.

Treat clients with dignity and respect

This means acknowledging that the welfare of your clients is your paramount concern and affirming that threatening, violent, dishonest or degrading behaviour is always unacceptable. You should include this principle in any written policy and have rules outlining the types of behaviour that are or are not acceptable. You should also make clients aware of your policy, their rights and who they can talk to if they have any concerns.

Understand the nature of abuse

Abuse may be physical, sexual, emotional or financial. It may also appear as neglect or failure to attend to personal safety. Consider what makes your clients vulnerable and design your work and procedures in a way which minimises the risks. For example, being clear about what levels of physical contact are appropriate for your organisation and having a clear policy on off duty contact between volunteers and clients. Volunteers who work with vulnerable clients may need training and information about the nature and signs of abuse.

Adopt work practices and codes of behaviour that minimise risks and protect both clients and workers

Plan and manage the work of your organisation in a way which minimises the opportunities for your clients to suffer harm. For example, some organisations have a rule that no-one can ever be alone with children. If lone working is unavoidable you should develop procedures that help to ensure the safety of clients and volunteers. Everyone in the organisation should be clear about their role, about your organisation's aims and values and about the accepted codes of behaviour. They should also know to whom they should report any concerns about clients or other members of staff or volunteers.

Help your volunteers to carry out their duties by providing support and training. Having an effective system for support and supervision of volunteers will help you to assess their general competence, the development of relationships with co-workers and clients and to identify any training needs. Be alert to any exceptional treatment, favourable or unfavourable, of any of your clients.

Develop a written policy on the protection of children, young people and vulnerable adults

Having a written policy will help to ensure that everyone in your organisation is aware of the importance of protecting vulnerable clients and will help them to understand their responsibilities.

The exact nature of such a policy will depend very much on the type of work that your organisation is doing, some organisations will need a very detailed and comprehensive policy, while for others one that is shorter and simpler will be more appropriate. Areas to consider when developing a policy include:

- **Recruitment, selection and training of staff and volunteers:** detailing the procedures in place to ensure safe recruitment and a commitment to providing appropriate training.
- **Reporting procedures:** this should clearly state how staff and volunteers should report allegations or suspicions of abuse and what their responsibilities are.
- **Good practice:** this may include procedures for lone working, guidance about relationships with clients and confidentiality issues.
- **Involvement of external authorities:** consideration should be given to when and how you might need to involve other agencies such as social work and the police.

This is not an exhaustive list and there may be other areas that your organisation will need to include. Your policy should be developed from a comprehensive assessment of the type of work that your organisation does and how to minimise the potential for risk to clients, staff and volunteers.

You should take care to ensure that all volunteers are familiar with your policy and are aware of their responsibilities in the protection of vulnerable clients and are provided with appropriate training and support.

Adopt consistent and effective recruitment and selection procedures

The key to good recruitment is to apply your policy and procedures consistently with all potential volunteers. Explain to anyone who questions a procedure that it is the routine practice of your organisation and an important way of managing risk.

Define the role: Be clear about what volunteers will be expected to do and use this to draw up a volunteer task description and a list of the qualities, skills and experience you are looking for.

Application form: using an application will enable you to gather consistent initial information about potential volunteers. Forms should state that you will treat all information as confidential.

Previous convictions: All applicants should be asked to declare any previous convictions and to confirm that there is no reason why they should not work with your client group. Ideally, this should be asked in a separate form from the application form and only seen by those involved in the selection process. The form should state

that because they will be working with vulnerable clients the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 requires them to declare all convictions, whether spent or unspent. It should also state that having a conviction will not necessarily debar anyone from becoming a volunteer.

Interviews: when interviewing volunteers who will be working with children it is important to ask fairly detailed questions about family background, childhood experiences, attitudes towards children in the looked-after system and expectations about the role. Further information about this is available from the Volunteering Unit (see Contacts List).

Disclosures (Police Checks): voluntary organisations working with children, young people and vulnerable adults now have access to free police checks on volunteers through the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). A request for a Disclosure should be done as the last stage of the selection process and should be seen as only one aspect of good recruitment and selection procedures. It should be made clear to potential volunteers at the start of the recruitment process that you will be requesting a Disclosure (see Set 2 InfoSheet 2.6 *Vetting Procedures* for more info).

References: you should take up written references, preferably from at least two people who are not relatives and ideally they should be followed up verbally. Where possible, one referee should have first hand knowledge of the applicant's work or experience with your client group. You will probably get a more helpful reference if you explain the kind of work and ask specific questions. You should also ask if the referee has any concerns about the applicant working with your client group.

Trial period: you may want to consider giving the volunteer a trial period at the start of their involvement in which you can assess their suitability to work with your client group. During this period you should offer an induction programme to help your new volunteer become familiar with the organisation and its working practices.

Develop effective and consistent procedures for responding to accidents, complaints and alleged or suspected incidents of abuse

Everyone in your organisation should know how to respond if it is alleged that one of your clients has been harmed or is at risk in any way. Volunteers should know that they must act even if they only have a suspicion of abuse. Your organisation should have clear reporting procedures and volunteers should know who in the organisation they should talk to about any allegations or concerns. You should also consider when you might need to involve external organisations such as social work or the police and how this relates to your confidentiality policy.

Establish links with relatives and carers and with relevant organisations

Parents, relatives and carers will have a key role in the welfare of your clients. Involving them in the work that you do and establishing clear lines of communication will enable you to work more effectively in the interests of your clients. Parents and carers should be made aware of your policies and procedures for protecting clients. Establishing links with other organisations working in your field will help you to be able to share experiences and keep up to date with good practice.

Further information

NSPCC Online- online child protection resource that seeks to collect, share and disseminate information on child abuse and neglect in the UK to professionals.

www.nspcc.org.uk/inform

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