

# Using volunteers in your project

## Introduction

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Several Way of Life projects are intending to involve volunteers in helping to deliver their projects.

For most organisations, there are many benefits that come from involving volunteers in their work. An obvious one is that volunteers provide a cost-effective staffing resource, and so let you extend the work of your project. This might take the form of being able to work with more participants, or being able to work over a wider geographical area. Other benefits from working with volunteers include:

- They can bring new skills that your organisation would not otherwise have;
- They can bring in-depth knowledge of the local area and the communities you are likely to be working with;
- They can use this knowledge to help you reach groups that you might otherwise find it hard to access;
- They can make your organisation seem more approachable to the people you want to work with;
- They can bring new ideas, a fresh approach and enthusiasm for your work and organisation;
- The training and work experience you give your volunteers is an investment in your local community. You may find you are achieving additional outcomes through working with volunteers, such as helping them gain qualifications and work experience.

Although some Way of Life projects are experienced in working with volunteers, or have formed partnerships with organisations such as Councils for Voluntary Service that do have this experience, others are not. As well as benefits, volunteers can bring problems and challenges for organisations, especially if they are working with volunteers for the first time. The information below discusses some of the issues you will need to take into account when preparing to work with volunteers.

## Terminology

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Some organisations talk about 'using' or 'employing' volunteers. The first is not very friendly, and the second can create problems for your organisation (see legal position below.) Most voluntary sector organisations use the terms 'working with' or 'involving' volunteers.

## Why volunteers rather than paid staff?

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As noted above, for most organisations the main benefit of volunteers is their cost-effectiveness. However, there are other considerations that you will need to set against this, and you will need to weigh up the costs and benefits of working with volunteers as part of your business planning process. We discuss some of these below.

### Cost effective, but **not** free

Although you do not pay volunteers a wage, this does not mean that there will be no costs at all to your organisation if you decide to work with volunteers. In particular *it should **not** cost someone money to come and volunteer for you.* This means that, as minimum you will need to pay:

- Travel expenses;
- The cost of any training they will need to carry out their volunteering role effectively;
- The cost of any equipment or materials they will need; and
- The cost of legal requirements such as criminal records bureau (CRB) checks and insurance.

You will also need to decide whether your organisation is going to pay additional expenses such as a lunch allowance or child care costs. The expenses you pay may affect who is going to be able to volunteer for you, and therefore should be considered along with your equalities policy. For example, women returners often look to volunteer as a way of getting back into the work place. But they might not be able to volunteer if they cannot afford to pay for childcare.

However, neither should people expect to make money by volunteering for you. Paying people over and above their expenses can create problems for your organisation (see legal position below). It can also affect people's benefits.

You should draw up an expenses policy for your volunteers. We would also advise you to discuss this with your local Job Centre / DWP office to ensure your policy does not clash with benefits legislation and requirements.

You should ensure expenses costs are built into your project's budget during the business planning stage.

### Other costs – support and supervision

As well as any training they need before they start, volunteers will need ongoing support and supervision to carry out their work for you. There should be someone they report to, who is responsible for sorting out any issues and queries volunteers may have about their work, and also for making sure volunteers are working to the organisation's policies and to the standards required. This will be particularly relevant if volunteers are working on their own.

You will need to consider who is going to take on the role of volunteer management and how much it will cost for them to do this, including any training they need in order to take on the role. Again, you should ensure these costs are built into your budget at the business planning stage.

### What are your volunteers going to do?

You should be very clear about the type of work you want volunteers to do in your project, and you should draw up a role description for each different role. As well as setting out the types of tasks, this should also set out the skills needed and the amount of time you would expect the volunteer to commit. You should include the role descriptions in your business plan.

Some organisations are very clear that they want their volunteer roles to be different to, and separate from, their staff roles. There is nothing wrong with asking volunteers to do work that is the same as, or similar to, that of paid staff, but you would need to consider whether this is appropriate or feasible. For example:

- Paid staff may work over their usual hours, cover sessions at short notice, or work evenings and weekends. Is it reasonable to ask volunteers to do the same?
- Would you think it was appropriate for volunteers to be handling cash, or being responsible for security on behalf of your organisation?
- Do you think volunteers should be managing, or responsible for the work of, other volunteers?
- It may be quite usual for staff from your organisation to go into people's homes on their own as part of their work. However, if they do this, they are likely to have experience of doing so from previous jobs, be aware of health and safety implications of doing so, and know and use your organisation's policies for reporting back to the office. Is a volunteer likely to have the same experience and training? Is it therefore reasonable to ask them to do this?
- Would you ask a volunteer to represent your organisation, for example, by giving a talk, going to a meeting with a funder or attending a case conference for a family they had been working with?

You will need to think about situations that are likely to arise during the course of your volunteers' work for you, and draw up any policies you think are necessary.

### Recruiting your volunteers

You will need to think about how you are going to recruit your volunteers and attract them to work with your organisation. As part of your business plan, you have to complete a marketing and communications strategy showing how you will give information about your project to different audiences. If you are planning to involve volunteers then they are one of the audiences you will need to target. You should also consider whether you need to include any milestones for volunteer recruitment in your business plan.

You should think about who are the most likely groups of people who will want to volunteer for your organisation. Example might include:

- Students;
- Parents;
- Retired people;
- People coming out of prison;
- Disabled people;
- Carers who are looking to get back into the work place; and
- Unemployed people.

You should consider what they are likely to want to get out of volunteering and how your project can help them. For example, research by Citizens Advice found that older people valued the social side of volunteering so they may be less likely to want a role that would mean they were working on their own. Students maybe looking for experience that will help them get a job.

You should also think about how and where to publicise your volunteering opportunities and the likely costs of doing so. Again, match your methods to the groups you are hoping to attract.

Who will deal with queries from potential volunteers? Will you need to put together a pack of information or an application form to send to them? How will you make sure that the volunteers have the skills and experience that your project needs? Will you interview prospective volunteers, and who will do this? Will you ask for references for your volunteers? How will you make sure volunteers are clear about the roles they would be taking on, and the likely commitment this would mean?

Finally, are there any groups of people you do **not** want to volunteer? How will you find out if people fall into those groups, and how will you deal with applications from them? The most obvious example is likely to be people with criminal records involving offences against children. If your organisation already has policies relating to applications for paid work, you should adapt them so they cover volunteer positions as well.

### Risk management

As part of your business plan, you have to do a risk analysis. If you are intending to work with volunteers, you should consider any risks attached to doing so.

For most organisations, the biggest risk is that, having based their levels of service around having volunteers, they then cannot recruit, or the volunteers they do have cannot do the work for some reason. You can minimise these risk through your recruitment process, both by recruiting widely and effectively and by being clear about what you expect of your volunteers in terms of time and commitment. You could aim to keep a 'pool' of volunteers to provide cover when necessary, and develop other contingency plans for your project.

The other main risk is that of volunteers not carrying out work to the quality standards required, or acting outside the organisation's policies and procedures. You can deal with this as you would for paid staff, by having effective training, supervision and quality control procedures in place.

### Workers, not employees – the legal position

Whilst it is good practice to give volunteers clear role descriptions, training, support and supervision, it is important that you do not create contracts of employment with your volunteers. This became an issue in some recent employment tribunal cases where volunteers attempted to show they were employees to gain extra rights, such as protection against unfair dismissal. Of course, as employees, they would also have the right to national minimum wage.

There is not a checklist which, if followed, will guarantee that your volunteer would never be counted as an employee. Tribunals have looked at issues such as:

- **The intent** behind the relationship – was it clear the organisation had intended to create a volunteer relationship?
- **Payment** – did the volunteer receive regular payments over and above their out of pocket expenses?
- **Extras** - did the volunteer receive extra benefits and perks not directly related to their volunteering role?

- **Requirements** – did the volunteer have a minimum number of hours they *had* to work or task that *had* to be performed?
- **Language used** – was it a ‘volunteer agreement’ or a ‘contract’? Did the person have a ‘role description’ or a ‘job description and person specification’?

Whilst you *do* need to consider these issues, bear in mind that the reason they became a problem for the organisations in question was because the volunteers felt they had not been treated fairly and had not been able to resolve their complaints within the organisation itself.

### Valuing volunteers

Your volunteers are more likely to stay with you if they feel valued and if they can see how their work is making a difference to your project. Consider how you are going to do this. Possible ways include:

- Having a regular newsletter or other ways of letting volunteers know what is going on in your organisation;
- Having volunteer social events;
- Making sure there are ways in which volunteers can make comments, complaints and suggestions, and that these are taken seriously;
- Certificates and awards, for example, for completion of training or completion of a year’s service ;and
- Involving volunteers in publicity and success stories about your project.

### Volunteer records

You will need to keep basic records about your volunteers such as name and contact details and signed copies of their volunteer agreements. These will be subject to data protection, so consider who is going to store them and how. You will probably need to keep more detailed records about your volunteers, such as training completed, roles undertaken and supervision notes. You should also consider what records your funders will require, particularly if you are using volunteer time as funding-in-kind for your project.

You might also want to consider how information about your volunteers can contribute to monitoring and evaluating your project. Think about questions you would want to ask at the start, for example, why do you want to volunteer, what do you hope to get out of it, what skills and experience can you bring? You might want to follow these up each year with questions such as has volunteering met your expectations, what have you got out of volunteering and are your skills being used. Tracking volunteers who leave might show that the skills and training they gained from involvement with your project has helped them get into work or further study. Preparing case studies based on your volunteers’ experience helps add interest to your monitoring reports.

### Further information

- Wales Council for Voluntary Action’s website [www.wcva.org.uk](http://www.wcva.org.uk) has a number of useful factsheets and other volunteering resources including a model volunteering policy and information about volunteers and criminal records checks.

- Volunteering England has a host of excellent resources on its website at [www.volunteering.org.uk](http://www.volunteering.org.uk) This includes frequently asked questions, example documents and policies and further information on the legal considerations of involving volunteers.
- The Volunteer Centre Edinburgh's site [www.volunteeredinburgh.org.uk](http://www.volunteeredinburgh.org.uk) includes a good article about volunteers' employment status.