

Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action Volunteers – sharing your successes and nightmares

Here are some good practice guidelines based on the ideas shared during the workshop. The guidelines are structured into the different stages that you will go through when considering the involvement of volunteers in your organisation's activities, namely:

- Defining what you want the volunteer to do, and what skills, qualities and experience they might need
- Attracting volunteers to your organisation
- What information will you give to potential volunteers?
- Choosing the right person for the role
- Supporting and developing your volunteers
- Your organisation's responsibilities towards volunteers

1. Defining what you want the volunteer to do, and what skills, qualities and experience they might need

Do you have a role description, that describes the duties a volunteer will be expected to undertake? This will not only help the potential volunteer to make a choice about whether the role would interest them. It can also help you to clarify the role with a new volunteer when you induct them.

Do you have a person specification that defines the skills, qualities and experience that you will be looking for in any potential volunteer? This could be a simple list of the essentials, for example that Home-Start is looking for people with parenting experience. Or it could be a more detailed review of the skills that you feel a person may need in order to undertake the volunteering role you have within your organisation.

Consider what is essential, and be aware that some people might be put off because they think that their experience does not fit with your requirements. Some people may need support in identifying exactly how their experience as a parent or student can be put to good use by your organisation.

You may find that a person specification can help you to:

- Make decisions about whether the person is right for your organisation or whether they can be signposted to an organisation where they could put their skills to better use
- Clarify your expectations of who you hope to attract through the recruitment process

We recognised at the outset that many people coming into volunteering do not want the experience to be the same as paid employment. They may be put off by too much in the way of formality and paperwork. So there is a balance to be achieved between ensuring clarity of expectations, and putting up a barrier to potential volunteers.

2. *Attracting volunteers to your organisation*

In discussions about our own experiences of becoming volunteers we recognised different motivations that people will have when considering volunteers.

Often the opportunity is at the right time in the right place. At various different milestones in our lives we might be looking for a new challenge, for example when children start schools or we are nearing retirement age. Or it might be seasonal. Volunteering might be a tradition in your family, or a particular activity attracts a new volunteer because they empathise with the cause of the charity or group.

Some people will be looking for flexibility in the hours they that they give, others will find it easier to fit a specific time slot into their schedules.

Because of these differing motivations and personal expectations, how to attract new volunteers can seem fairly random and unpredictable. Here are some ideas from the workshop:

- Writing newspaper articles about your activities, or doing radio interviews
- Newspaper advertising
- Posters in libraries, community centres, police stations, colleges, leisure centres and pubs
- Talking to schools and groups
- Connexions
- Leaflets distributed free in the local paper
- Website
- Pre-retirement courses
- Emailing employees in large organisations

You could ask all potential volunteers to ask how they heard about your organisation, so that you can monitor the success of different forms of advertising.

3. *What information will you give to potential volunteers?*

Potential volunteers will want to know what you expect from them and what they can expect from you. You may want to give this information to them in writing, or discuss it at interview (see below). However you choose to do it, it is important to clarify expectations at an early stage, so that the potential volunteer can make an informed decision about whether the volunteering role is right for them.

They might want to know:

- What does the organisation do?
- What time commitment is expected of them?
- What support and training you will give them?
- How they are expected to behave?
- What experience, age etc. are you looking for?
- How will you ensure their personal safety?
- Will you pay out of pocket expenses?
- What paperwork will they have to complete?
- How will they know they are doing a good job?
- Are there opportunities to progress and develop as volunteers?

Some of these questions could be answered in a brief summary to go out with the initial application form.

As an example, Daisy's Dream sends out the following information to all potential volunteers when inviting them to apply:

- An information sheet, which includes how volunteers can assist in service provision, "our commitment to you", "your commitment to us", and an outline of the recruitment process.
- A leaflet about the services offered by Daisy's Dream
- A volunteer newsletter
- An application form
- An equal opportunities questionnaire

4. *Choosing the right person for the role*

Participants at the workshop discussed the processes they use for selecting volunteers, which range from an informal discussion with one person from the organisation to a more formal interview with trustees or committee members.

Where the organisation has a training programme for all new volunteers, this often forms part of the selection process. It can give volunteers the opportunity to learn more about what is expected of them, and volunteer coordinators the chance to assess skills and aptitudes. If you are using a course as part of the selection process, this should be made clear, and volunteers should be given the opportunity for discussion and feedback.

Remember the caution from the beginning of the workshop; a rigorous selection process may put off some people. However, the selection process you use is important to help you avoid making the mistake of choosing the wrong person, who might have a detrimental effect on the service that you offer.

Potential volunteers will also need to know if you intend to take up references, and whether you will be doing a Criminal Records Bureau check.

5. *Supporting and developing your volunteers*

We discussed the importance of helping volunteers to feel supported whilst they work with you. This could be through weekly telephone contact or one-to-one meetings, monthly group meetings, newsletters, annual social activities etc.

The best way to give feedback about how an individual is doing is through one-to-one contact. And it can be time consuming. So your organisation should decide on the process that best works for you and your volunteers, bearing in mind the types of work the volunteer will be involved in, whether they are working by themselves, how experienced they are etc.

Ideally, you should aim to meet each of your volunteers individually at least once a year, to provide a two-way opportunity to assess their performance, development needs and opportunities and how they are feeling about the work they are doing. Emergency support should also be offered, especially to those volunteers who are working by themselves, or in stressful situations. Volunteers should be able to go home at the end of their session, leaving any concerns behind them.

6. *Your organisation's responsibilities towards volunteers*

You do not have the same legal responsibilities to your volunteers as you do to paid staff, but you do have a duty of care to them as individuals. Increasingly, volunteers are being given more rights, which can put them in the same position as employees. It is recommended that you use the health and safety legislation and equal opportunities legislation as best practice guidance for how you treat your volunteers and how you ensure their well-being.

For further guidance on some of these issues please use the following link to the Volunteering England website – www.volunteering.org.uk