



Supporting your volunteers

What do we mean by support?

The terms 'support' and 'supervision' are often referred to as though they are the same. It is important for the staff working with volunteers to understand that they have separate meanings in order to value the purpose and benefit of both.

- Support is an informal process which identifies the encouragement and help that a volunteer can expect.
- Supervision is more formal and can involve setting tasks and targets for achieving objectives and measuring progress. Supervision can provide an opportunity to review the training needs of a volunteer, consider whether the role is too demanding, or not demanding enough, and decide if appropriate support is being provided.

Why support important?

- It helps the volunteer to carry out their role to the best of their ability.
- The volunteers can understand more about the culture and ethos of the organisation or group.
- It helps motivate and enthuse volunteers.
- It stops volunteers from feeling isolated, or even exploited, in their role.
- It helps volunteers cope with the demands of the role.
- It shows the volunteer that the organisation values them.
- If volunteers feel supported they are more likely to be committed and satisfied with their experience. They may choose to volunteer with you for longer, return in the future or encourage others to help out too.

What should I consider when planning support for volunteers?

Support can take many forms but all volunteers need some kind of support. Deciding what's the most appropriate will depend on individual volunteers and the nature of their role. A bereavement counsellor will need different support than a volunteer in a community café. Further support might be needed if an individual has an illness, medical condition or generally lacks confidence.

Although different volunteers need different levels of support, it is important that all have equal access to support, whether they use it or not.

You don't have to include everything, but it is a good idea to use some of the points from the approaches below to ensure volunteers are supported:

The personal approach

- Try and get to know your volunteers and make them feel welcome. Sometimes a simple hello, remembering their name or asking how they are getting on can make all the difference.
- Make sure volunteers have a contact person to take any questions, issues or problems to when volunteering. Remember that this contact may change with staff shifts or holidays.
- Spend time alongside your volunteers, to get to know them and their role.
- Keep in touch with volunteers. This could be in lots of different ways, for example face to face meetings, a conversation over coffee, by telephone, email, text or letter.
- Keep volunteers up to date with what is going on in the organisation, such as staff changes and

future plans, so that they feel part of the team.

- Value their contribution and recognise the contribution they make at an individual and organisational level by saying thank you privately and publically.
- Individual certificates that celebrate their specific contribution can be awarded.

Group and peer support

- You could have formal or informal group meeting. This could be a 'task meeting' or a 'role meeting' to focus on specific issues, share ideas and generally discuss areas of interest.
- Encourage peer support which involves volunteers supporting each other. This may be in pairs or small groups.
- Consider a mentoring system. An experienced volunteer formally supports a volunteer who is new to the role. This can also offer progression for a more experienced volunteer and allows them to feel valued.
- Celebrations and informal social events where volunteers can have the opportunity to meet other volunteers for example, at Christmas or at the end of a project.
- Encourage volunteers to get to know each other using online networks such as Facebook.
- Invite existing volunteers to talk about their experiences and share their skills at meetings.

Support through training and learning

- A good induction and relevant training makes sure and the volunteer can do what's needed for the role.
- The provision of high quality training can show that you are investing in your volunteers.
- Ask volunteers what relevant training they need for their role and offer this.
- Be clear what training is essential for the role and what's optional.

Support from the organisation

- Provide volunteers with a volunteer handbook. This will include volunteer policies and procedures, such as equality, health and safety and solving difficult situations.
- Make sure volunteer activities are covered by appropriate insurance and have been risk assessed.
- Give volunteers access to appropriate resources and materials needed to carry out their role effectively and safely. For example uniform, personal protective equipment and guidance on the safe use of equipment.
- Create a dedicated volunteering section on the organisation's website or intranet.
- Hold a celebration event for example, Volunteers Week Award Ceremonies.
- Show volunteers any thank you cards from clients.
- Provide refreshments at meetings and training, where possible.
- Make sure that volunteers can, and know how to, claim out of pocket expenses.
- Ensure that volunteers are aware that have the right to have time off for holidays, emergencies, illness, job interviews and compassionate leave.
- Provide volunteers with a reference.

What next?

Support needs should be identified from the start of volunteer involvement and reviewed regularly. The need for support may change as the roles change or reduce as the volunteer gains confidence.

In order to provide support to volunteers, someone in the organisation needs to have the skills, time, resources and support to carry it out. Staff who manage volunteers need training and support and it should be part their role profile. Wider staff also need to understand that supporting volunteers can benefit everyone.

The organisation will hopefully keep their volunteers longer as it's an important part of giving volunteers a good experience. Well supported volunteers who have been well supported can get on with their role without as much input from staff. Externally, organisation will gain a good reputation and service users will benefit from regular and happy volunteers!

Volunteer managers will often have to be flexible in managing issues arising from supporting volunteers. If you are unsure what kind of support a volunteer needs, ask them!

Need some more help?

If you would like more help or advice in relation to this guide please get in touch with us:

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