



## Supporting your volunteers

### **Resource: Voluntary Action Leeds**

Once a volunteer has been recruited, selected and trained and is doing their job effectively, they have become a valuable resource to an organisation. This does not, however, mean volunteers can be just left "to get on with it!". It is common, and justifiable, for example, for volunteers to look to their organisation for continuing help and support. In turn, by valuing people, enabling their personal development, building skills and experience, making them feel motivated, needed and wanted, an organisation is demonstrating a commitment to its volunteers. Support for volunteers should be integral to the volunteering experience. This paper looks at the issues relating to this.

### **Why is there a need to support volunteers?**

- To provide opportunities to discuss issues, problems and concerns, gain feedback, learn from the experiences of others, raise awareness, share ideas.
- Help combat the isolation of some volunteer roles.
- Prevent volunteers from all forms of exploitation.
- Provide an opportunity to motivate volunteers.
- Enable volunteers to value their work and, in turn, feel valued, accepted, part of the organisation and satisfied with what they are doing.
- Enable volunteers to cope with the demands of their role more effectively.
- Leads to well-supported volunteers, who are likely to work more effectively, with the subsequent benefits for their organisation and its client/user group.
- Enable volunteers to understand and adopt the ethos of their organisation.
- Enable volunteers to further their personal development and enhance life skills.
- Enable volunteers to look at and assess their training needs.
- Provide an arena for progression (e.g. to more complex tasks or a position on the management committee) and ongoing training.
- Enable the organisation to benefit from the skills of volunteers with extra support needs, if appropriate support and resources are available.
- Enable the organisation to benefit through the involvement of the widest possible range of people as volunteers.
- Demonstrate the organisation takes the involvement of volunteers seriously.
- Create a positive image of the organisation.

Without support many people would have difficulty in maintaining their roles as volunteers. This is in no way an indictment of an individual's competence but simply suggests volunteers who receive little or no support are unlikely to feel valued, needed or wanted. They will probably leave the organisation viewing it rather negatively.

## Who benefits from supporting volunteers?

Offering support to volunteers is not only beneficial to them but there is also a knock-on effect for both the organisation and its client user group. An adequately trained, well-supported volunteer is better equipped to undertake their task, thus enabling them to work more effectively with the users of the organisation, whilst needing less supervision from paid staff. Moreover, people outside of the organisation (e.g. visitors, other professionals such as social workers etc.) who are involved with the same client/user group may also receive positive feedback and so view the organisation more favourably. It could be argued, therefore, supporting volunteers can benefit everyone who comes in to contact with the organisation!

## Does support differ from supervision?

In short, yes! The following points may clarify this:

Support is primarily about meeting the needs of **volunteers**, supervision is likely to be more concerned with the needs of the **organisation**.

Supervision ensures, through regular review sessions, individual volunteers are working to their role description and acting in accordance with the guidelines and policies of the organisation. Support encompasses a far wider range of issues and concerns.

Supervision can, for example, provide an opportunity to assess the training needs of a volunteer, consider whether their role is too demanding (or not sufficiently demanding) and ascertain if they are receiving adequate support. Therefore, supervision can perform a supportive function and will often form part of a volunteer's support.

Supervision is often formal with a specific focus, it is about prioritising, setting objectives and boundaries while support tends to be more informal, offering volunteers the opportunity to set the agenda.

Given the considerable overlap between support and supervision, the worker responsible for volunteers within the organisation needs to be clear about the purpose of both support and supervision. It may also be of benefit to all those concerned if the organisation's volunteer policy acknowledges that both supervision and support are a necessary part of working with volunteers.

## How can organisations support their volunteers?

Support for volunteers can take many forms, however, there are two important issues about support. Firstly, **support is a vital and necessary part of working with volunteers in that its main function is to meet the needs of volunteers**. As already noted, volunteer support can benefit the whole organisation but, first and foremost, the form support takes should be focused on volunteers requirements. Secondly, **supporting volunteers is a continuous process** starting from the initial meeting, a warm welcome, privacy, a cup of tea, chocolate biscuits... and it goes from there.

At any stage, a volunteer may need support. It is important for workers and management committee members to be aware of this and offer, or enable the volunteer to access, support.

Addressing these issues relies not only on giving someone responsibility for managing volunteers but also ensuring this person has the adequate competencies, time, resources and support for themselves to do the job.

## Ways of supporting volunteers

There are many ways to support volunteers. Deciding which are appropriate will depend on individual volunteer needs and the nature of their work. As volunteer support is an ongoing process, it may not be a good idea to take just one method and stick with it.

Indeed, it is common for organisations to use a combination of support methods as they are often complementary.

There could of course, be volunteers who feel they do not need, or who have their own source of, support. Others will want one-to-one supervision, peer support, group meetings, ongoing training and whatever else is being offered. Volunteer coordinators need to weigh up advantages and disadvantages of various methods and assess how each may fit the situation within their organisation. Flexibility is the key - listen to what volunteers want, enable them to assess their needs, experiment as this, hopefully, will lead to the organisation having a well-motivated, valued team of volunteers. Below are some ideas and approaches to consider.

## The personal approach

- Give volunteers a genuinely warm welcome and remember their name!
- Ensure volunteers have a named contact person as their support worker. This should be someone with relevant knowledge, understanding, experience and communication skills, who needs to be approachable, supportive, a 'good listener', encouraging, responsive to volunteers' needs - and be available!
- Offer personal, one-to-one support (possibly including supervision). As noted above, supervision should not replace, but rather be part of a support package. In some organisations paid workers and volunteers receive the same form/level of supervision and this does have advantages.
- Keep in regular, frequent contact with volunteers. This can be (preferably) face to face, by telephone or by letter -whichever is the most appropriate.
- Consider having an 'open door' policy, however, although this may appear accessible to volunteers it can be difficult to time manage and may result in one or two volunteers monopolising the Volunteer Co-ordinators time!
- Ensure **all volunteers** have equal access to support even if they appear not to want it.
- Offer to work alongside (though not 'watch over') volunteers. Acknowledge volunteers as **people** and as **individuals**.
- Value the skills, knowledge, expertise and attributes of volunteers!
- Praise and give thanks to volunteers (frequently).
- Keep volunteers well informed with what is going on within the organisation and on issues which may affect their work. For example, changes in management, legislation, benefits, vacant posts etc.
- Give volunteers guidelines albeit in a supportive way. Let a volunteer know what their responsibility is, what they should not be asked to do and give them time to adjust to the work. Ensure they are not over-committed or over-worked, but agree time limits enabling them begin work gradually. In other words, help volunteers do their job by not 'throwing them in at the deep end'.
- Encourage **but do not** enforce volunteers to attend support meetings.
- Try not to have favourites but if you do, do not make it too obvious!

## Group and Peer Support

- Have regular volunteer support meetings. These can be either informal or structured. For example 'task meetings' which focus on specific issues, general gatherings which provide a forum for discussion, facilitated group work sessions etc. Other issues to consider may be the type of work volunteers do, the client/ user group, geographical area etc. Listen to what volunteers want and endeavour to respond appropriately.
- Arrange social events. These may include a night out at the local pub, a visit somewhere, a residential weekend, a quiz!
- Encourage peer support. This can include volunteers getting together in small groups or in pairs.
- Consider using a mentoring system. This could be done between two volunteers, one more experienced than the other, co-mentoring, or through the recruitment of people to be trained purely as volunteer mentors
- Invite existing volunteers to speak of their experiences at support meetings.

## Support through training and participation

- Ensure there is an adequate, effective training and induction programme which enables volunteers to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills.
- Invite volunteers to express what training they feel they would like and, if feasible, enable this to take place. Although specific ongoing training needs can be requested by workers and/or volunteers, there may also be a need for further training brought about by changes in the organisation or external factors such as legislation. Ongoing training may be delivered within the organisation or by an outside body.
- Try to ensure ongoing training is relevant, adequate, appropriate and considered an integral part of voluntary work.
- Organise events e.g. talks, open days, seminars. Encourage volunteers to attend or even get involved in these.
- Encourage and enable volunteers to be represented at all levels within the organisation. This could include having a volunteer representative at staff meetings, on the management committee, having a volunteers committee etc.
- Ensure the above will mean volunteers have the chance to speak out on major decisions that will affect what they do and how they do it.
- Have a noticeboard for volunteer issues.

## Support from the organisation

- Ensure volunteers are covered by the policies of the organisation. In particular Equal Opportunities, Health and Safety and Insurance Policies.
- Ensure volunteers have access to grievance and disciplinary procedure.
- Ensure volunteers can claim reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses.
- Ensure volunteers are provided with any necessary special clothing, equipment, tools etc.
- Ensure volunteers have the right to join a trade union.
- Ensure volunteers have the right to time off work for holidays, emergencies, illness, job interviews and compassionate leave.
- Acknowledge officially the involvement of volunteers, their contribution to the work of the organisation and delivery of its services. This could be done by letter or a Christmas card for example.
- Ensure volunteers have the right to a reference if one is requested.

In conjunction with what is outlined above, volunteers may have other support mechanisms outside the organisation. This is to be encouraged but bear in mind the issue of confidentiality. Volunteers need to be reminded that they hold a great deal of (potentially) sensitive information about people.

Support for volunteers is very much a two-way process. One or more of the above may be what is required to ensure volunteers are well supported. However, volunteer co-ordinators will often need to experiment, trying out new ideas, listening and responding to volunteers. Imposing support, appropriate or not, on people who do not want it, is likely to leave them feeling pressured.

### **What other issues are there to consider?**

There are many ways of supporting volunteers. The advantages for organisations implementing an effective programme of support seem apparent. There are, however, certain issues which may arise for the volunteer coordinator and a little prior consideration should be given to these.

- Communication is an all important part of supporting volunteers. This is particularly true of listening skills. Those responsible for supporting volunteers need to feel confident regarding their listening and communication skills and/or consider doing some training in this area. This is even more relevant if counselling is offered as a means of support.
- There may also be a need to look at other areas of training e.g. group work, supervision, assertiveness etc.
- Consider what records (if any) to keep, for example, a register of volunteers attending support sessions, details arising from one-to-one meetings etc.
- Consider reasons and implications if certain volunteers do not take up offers of support.
- Be clear to co-workers and management committee members that supporting volunteers is important and should be recognised as a valid, integral part of the work, not something done when there is a little spare time.
- It is important to be clear about personal boundaries. For example, the amount of time spent supporting volunteers or an individual, what can be offered in terms of counselling or supervision etc.
- Ensure the volunteer coordinator has, themselves, a network of support. This may be from their line manager, management committee, co-workers, some kind of forum/group or friends.

There may well be other issues to consider, depending on the type of organisation and its work. One example is volunteer-led organisations which probably do not have workers allocated to specific roles. In this instance, it is likely the people involved will support each other informally.

Another major area for discussion is that of involving volunteers who are perceived to have support needs over and above what would normally be offered - often termed as 'extra support needs'.

To conclude, support for a volunteer should begin at the first point of contact and remain continuous throughout their time spent with the organisation. Recruitment, selection, induction, training and placing are all important stages for building and cementing the volunteer/organisation relationship. However, support is integral at all times and underpins this whole process. In many respects, it is a most complex area for organisations and, in particular, volunteer coordinators to tackle, and calls for a high degree of flexibility and much thought.

**If you would like support involving or recruiting volunteers, please contact Eileen at Dudley CVS's Volunteer Centre: [eileenfielding@dudleycvs.org.uk](mailto:eileenfielding@dudleycvs.org.uk)**