

Voluntary Action-**Leeds** Volunteer Selection

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SELECTING VOLUNTEERS

Once an organisation has decided why it wants/needs to involve volunteers and is clear as to their roles, it would seem logical to begin the process of recruiting people. Indeed, when reaching this stage it is often tempting for organisations to 'go public' in order to attract potential volunteers, for fear of losing the momentum. There is, however, still a major issue to address - that of selection. Is *everyone*, for example, going to be accepted as a volunteer, without exception? Or, is there a need to select people? If there is, how will they be selected? And so on!

This paper looks at the issues concerned with developing appropriate selection procedures, what can be considered and offers suggestions for a basic framework within which organisations can work.

How does an organisation start to consider how it will select volunteers? The paper 'Should volunteers be involved in the organisation?' argues that organisations must be *absolutely clear* about their reasons for involving volunteers. If this has been thought through properly the organisation will be aware that volunteer involvement will impact on three areas: the organisation; the users and the volunteers themselves. Therefore, when deciding what kind of people are needed and how they will be chosen, all three elements ought to be considered. Of course, finding the 'right' kind of people cannot always be guaranteed, however, by developing effective selection procedures organisations are better placed to discern between appropriate and inappropriate volunteers.

Can any preparation be done to make the selection process more effective? Focusing on the specific roles of volunteers should enable organisations get the right people for those roles. This involves forward planning. Organisations can help themselves by drawing up a portfolio of volunteer tasks; job descriptions and person specifications.

A portfolio of volunteer tasks provides a ready list of opportunities and assigned tasks available for volunteers. The portfolio will contain a brief outline for each task and may incorporate other aspects of the recruitment/selection process e.g. the interview schedule, an induction pack and training details. Additions can be made as more tasks are identified or volunteer roles change and the amended job descriptions and personal specifications can be inserted accordingly. The portfolio can act as a useful handbook for the person responsible for managing volunteers.

Many organisations produce *job descriptions* for volunteers. These are a useful tool since they specify and clarify the tasks volunteers will do while enabling the organisation to be clear themselves about volunteer tasks. Job descriptions can also

help define the boundaries between volunteers and paid staff and limit prejudice, as potential volunteers are selected on the basis of their ability to do a specific task. If used too rigidly, however, job descriptions may pose problems, making volunteering less flexible and even restricting the creativity of volunteers. Some argue job descriptions can 'over-formalise' voluntary work. A job description can also be discriminatory in that it could create barriers for people who have difficulty reading, or be written in inappropriate language, as well as encouraging organisations to look only for people who have specialised skills and meet very specific criteria. Therefore, when drawing up a job description, it is important to consciously consider whether it will discriminate against certain people and, if so, to take steps to ensure any discrimination or restrictions are overcome.

A volunteer job description needs to be flexible enough to meet the varying needs and abilities of volunteers, so it is preferable to develop a broad based description rather than one which is too specific and highly detailed. Appendix 1 suggests questions to consider when constructing a volunteer job description. In short, job descriptions should be used to help potential volunteers rather than exclude them.

If job descriptions are used, producing volunteer *person specifications* may prove beneficial too. Such specifications help identify **essential** skills, knowledge and ability needed to do the job. They may also incorporate a list of criteria which are relevant and **desirable** for the job, but not absolutely necessary. So, for example, in order to work with unemployed young people, having some empathy with young people and an understanding of the issues regarding being out of work would be **essential**, however, although **desirable**, it would not be essential to know all the details relating to unemployment benefits as this knowledge could be gained through training. Specifications further aid selection since they can be used to stress the validity of life experience and interests, particularly those of a "non-traditional" nature. Appendix 1 outlines questions to consider when constructing such a document.

Can interviewing volunteers be part of the selection process?

Interviewing prospective volunteers is, arguably, the most crucial stage of a selection and recruitment process. Because of this, this issue is discussed at length in the paper 'Interviewing Volunteers'. If interviews are conducted, whatever the format, they need to have purpose, be done professionally and, require forethought as to what to include.

Is there a need to keep records on volunteers?

The amount of documentation kept on volunteers varies considerably between organisations and often relates to the nature of their work. The following section considers the options, giving particular focus to references.

Application Form

Most organisations have application forms which volunteers are asked to complete. These usually request background information: - name, address, age, employment, skills, experience, interests and so on. Questions asking people why they want to volunteer are also often included and, indeed, these do allow applicants to explain their reasons for volunteering. One drawback, is that forms may discourage people with low literacy skills, therefore, the person responsible for gathering information needs to be sensitive to this. A final tip, include the clause below (or similar) in the application form which the volunteer has to agree to sign.

"Your role involves contact with vulnerable people, therefore, we ask you under the requirements of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 to declare all convictions including spent conviction."

References

Taking up references on potential volunteers is often assumed key to good recruitment and selection practice. This, however, need not be the case and many voluntary projects and community groups, especially if they are 'volunteer led', do not regard references as necessary or relevant. The critical issue here concerns the benefit of references and how they might assist in the assessment of a potential volunteer's suitability. References can provide additional information on a volunteer and they may also be seen as a means of protecting an organisation. Insurers for example may insist on references as part of the organisation's duty of care. This notwithstanding, the limitations of references should be recognised, they are, after all, simply the views of another person and as such their accuracy and detail is limited. A referee may not have the appropriate knowledge of the volunteer's background, or not wish to reveal certain information. With this in mind, referees should be informed that any information disclosed by them may be discussed between the organisation and person volunteering.

Therefore, if an organisation does decide to ask for references on potential volunteers, it needs to be clear regarding the reasons why and exactly how it will use the information. In certain circumstances, the details given in a reference could act as the focal point for discussion and this should certainly be the case if areas of potential difficulty are highlighted. Failing to discuss references which may influence decisions regarding the suitability of prospective volunteers, means that the organisation is not acting responsibly. Volunteers should also be given an indication of the comments made about them on a reference and be offered an opportunity to discuss any relevant issues. If someone's suitability is based solely on a reference, then that person has a right to know why this is the case and be consulted. A negative reference may highlight potential problems but this alone should not prevent a person from doing the type of voluntary work which interests them. Nor should it exclude them from other forms of voluntary activity. By involving potential

volunteers in the decision making process at this stage, they may feel more positive about doing voluntary work and the organisation as a whole.

In short, effective equal opportunities ensures volunteering is open to as many people as possible. If all options have been explored and still no opportunities for voluntary work exist, people should be referred elsewhere for further guidance. (See paper 'Releasing Volunteers')

Research indicates that well-planned interviews, thorough induction and support, are effective means for identifying appropriate volunteers, more so than relying on the comments in a reference. **Interviews are important.** They provide a forum for open and frank discussion. An effective interview will more accurately gauge the extent to which sensitive issues are likely to actually present a problem, than will a reference.

This suggests that it is not essential for organisations to take up references in order to adopt effective selection practices although, of course, many organisations will continue (and may be required) to do so. The following paragraphs outline good practice if references / other checks are used as part of the selection process.

a) When to take up references:

References can be taken up before a prospective volunteer is interviewed, although it is unlikely the organisation will be aware of the person's particular interests and background. It may therefore, be more appropriate to wait until after the interview when a reference can be used more to support the information that has been gathered. References should definitely be taken up *before* the volunteer begins their voluntary work, not to do so rather invalidates the point of seeking references and an embarrassing situation could arise.

b) What to include when asking for a reference:

There is no ideal standard format for references as a great deal depends on the kind of work an organisation is involved in. In conjunction with straightforward questions ('How long have you known X?'), it is useful to ask a range of open questions ('What can you tell us about the interests of X?') or more specific ('X will be working as a fund-raiser, are there any concerns/comments you may wish to raise regarding this?'). These offer referees the opportunity to express opinions and raise issues of concern. The person giving a reference also needs to be aware that any details they give may be discussed between the prospective volunteer and the organisation.

An important issue regarding information given on references is concerned with knowledge of criminal behaviour. As noted, an open or more specific question enables a referee to express their opinions and give information about someone. The situation could arise whereby details of known criminal behaviour and/or a criminal conviction are disclosed. These must be taken seriously but treated with the utmost caution and investigated further. For example, a referee can have 'the wrong

end of the stick', their information may be inaccurate, even vindictive, or similarly, they may present information in a distorted, prejudiced manner. Such a situation could (arguably) be easier to investigate if, say, the referee was acting in a professional capacity (e.g. doctor, probation officer, social worker etc.) but even so, details and information need to be double-checked. Furthermore, irrespective of their status, the referee should never be asked directly to disclose details of criminal convictions, it must remain open for them to decide.

c) How to take up references:

Asking for references can be intimidating and may deter people from volunteering. If references are to be taken up, an organisation needs to ensure it explains the reasons why it is doing so and offer support in helping the prospective volunteer to identify suitable referees. Care should be taken not to reinforce the stereotype of the 'professional' as the person best able to judge a prospective volunteer! In general, volunteers can be asked to name two referees, preferably people who have known them well for at least a couple of years, but who are not closely related.

d) Requesting references:

Ideally, the reference reply form should be sent with a covering letter and a list/description of the proposed duties and activities of the volunteer. A stamped, addressed envelope should always be enclosed.

e) 'Doubtful' references:

Organisations should remember that references indicating any potential problems, such as those noted above, do not necessarily mean a volunteer is unsuitable. The organisation together with the volunteer should, wherever possible, try to explore areas of concern eventually deciding on the best option to pursue. Although it may be uncomfortable, those involved in the interview should not avoid sensitive issues. A person who has had difficulties in the past, has very demanding family commitments or who suffers from other recurrent problems (mental health, for example) may still have much to offer. If, in the final analysis a volunteer is not suitable, the organisation should enable the person to look at the options open to them (see paper 'Releasing Volunteers').

Vetting (incorporating criminal records & police checks)

Volunteers with local authorities, social services, housing or education departments, the probation or health services are likely to undergo stringent vetting procedures - i.e. police checks. This is also the case for volunteers working in childcare for national voluntary organisations (e.g. Barnardo's, NCH, The Children's Society). The

vast majority of voluntary organisations, however, have no direct access to police checks (although some do develop 'informal' channels to get police checks carried out)! The Criminal Records Bureau has been set up to manage disclosures and you can find out more by looking at www.crb.gov.uk.

An alternative approach is for organisations to aim for a policy of self-disclosure. Enabling a volunteer to disclose specific information, during an interview has the advantage of dealing with the issue immediately and hopefully with sensitivity. (Also see clause recommended above in '*Application Form*'). With police checks there is the danger of over reliance. Studies have shown many offenders are *never caught or convicted*. Identification too, can be prone to error. Simply, police checks can be useful to help with selecting volunteers and should not be the crux of the selection process! These points demonstrate the importance of effective, sound and sensitive selection procedures.

Other checks

Organisations may feel it appropriate to a reference and/or report from other professional bodies. Some, for example, fall into line with private sector practices and request doctors reports - e.g. a person's medical history, HIV status, details of major operations etc. There is much to debate here, ethical as well as practical and the effectiveness of such an approach remains open to question.

Volunteer Agreements

Agreements, sometimes inappropriately referred to as contracts, are written guidelines on mutual undertakings between organisation and volunteer. They result from negotiation, are signed by both parties and should be reviewed and updated regularly. Typically, an agreement will include: job title, role(s), hours/days of voluntary work, location, person(s) responsible for supervision and/or support, a set of guidelines or list of 'do's and don'ts', details of any probationary period, references to other policies, holidays, expenses etc. There should be no binding statements as there are dangers of an agreement becoming a contract of employment - see paper 'Volunteer Agreements'.

Can training aid the selection process?

Training sessions provide an opportunity to assess prospective volunteers. The setting is a particularly useful one in which to judge how people relate to each other and to a group situation. Issues such as equal opportunities, racism, language, drugs, the ethos of the organisation and so on, often arise within the training arena. How people deal with these can give further indication as to their suitability. The paper 'Training Volunteers' covers these and associated issues in more depth.

Are there any final points to consider?

The process of selecting volunteers can be very complex, costly, time consuming and forever changing. It necessitates good time-management, planning, and having effective systems.

Organisations need to have a clear policy with regard to confidentiality. Information gathered on prospective volunteers needs to be kept safe and secure. Who has access to this (and why) raises further issues.

Selection is integral to the whole volunteer-involvement process. Organisations need to understand this and how it links in with the roles, recruitment, induction, training, support and, if necessary, release of volunteers. All these components should to be monitored, evaluated and reviewed regularly.

Last but not least involve as many people as possible throughout the whole selection process including, if feasible, existing volunteers!

Questions to consider for constructing a volunteer opportunity

Job title

What is the voluntary work position called?

Purpose of the position

What are the objectives of this position?

Roles / Tasks

What will the volunteers be required to do?

What are the different elements of the work?

What are the key tasks?

What aspects of the work may be difficult or unpleasant?

Commitment

How many hours will the voluntary work require? What options are available to volunteers?

Location

Where is the voluntary work located?

Volunteer / Paid Staff

What is the relationship between volunteers and paid staff?

Client Group

What client group will the volunteer be involved with?

Support

Who will support / supervise the volunteer?

Accountability

Who will the volunteer be accountable to?

Training

What training will be necessary and available?

Recognition

In what ways will the volunteer be given recognition?

Miscellaneous

Is there expectation placed on volunteers e.g. initiative, teamwork?

What are the requirements, if any, re: health or physique necessary for the voluntary work?

What particular knowledge, skills, experience, qualities and attributes are required? Which of these are essential and which are desirable?

Does the volunteer believe in, understand and accept Equal Opportunities?

Will there be regular / irregular hours?

If it is required or advantageous, does the volunteer have their own transport?

Does the volunteer need to work as part of a team?

Does the volunteer need to deal with any administration?

Will the volunteer be required to handle money?

In what practical ways will the volunteer need support?

What's in it for the volunteer, e.g. new friends, interests, being useful, learn new skills etc. ?

This is only a basic guide, there may be specific issues relating to organisations, which are not included here.