

Voluntary Action-**Leeds** Volunteer Involvement

Stringer House, 34 Lupton Street, Hunslet, Leeds LS10 2QW

SHOULD VOLUNTEERS BE INVOLVED IN THE ORGANISATION?

Deciding whether or not to employ volunteers is an issue facing many voluntary and statutory organisations. In order to look at ways of addressing this most fundamental question, there needs to be careful examination of a number of points.

1. What are the costs and resource implications associated with involving volunteers and can the organisation meet these?
2. How will (or does) volunteer involvement affect the organisation's purpose, aims and objectives, values and ethos?
3. If areas of conflict, relating to the involvement of volunteers, arise how can they be resolved?
4. Benefit to organisation and client/user group needs to be ensured as does providing volunteers with a valuable experience, can this be guaranteed?
5. Careful thought and planning needs to be given to what roles volunteers will play, how they will be recruited, selected, trained and supported, how can this be undertaken and who will do it effectively?

The aim of this paper is to provide a 'good practice' framework for organisations to adopt.

Will involving volunteers cost much?

It is more costly for an organisation to pay workers than employ unpaid ones, however, there are a number of ongoing resource implications for involving volunteers.

1. Volunteers should not be seen solely as a cheap alternative. This is a negative perception which implies volunteers are second choice ("...if we had the money we wouldn't need (or even want) volunteers...").
2. The 'duty of care' an organisation has to its client/user group, also applies to volunteers. If an organisation aims to deliver a good quality service, they will need well-trained, adequately-resourced staff and volunteers in order to do so.

The following ongoing costs and resource implications need to be considered before any decision is taken on involving volunteers. These should represent the minimum requirements.

- Staff (employing volunteer manager / training existing staff etc.)
- Selection (administration /postage /police checks)
- Recruitment (publicity / posters / leaflets / advertising)
- Training (trainers / room hire / equipment / refreshments)
- Health & Safety (policies and procedures / training for volunteers)
Insurance
- Volunteers Expenses (travel costs / mileage / refreshments / childcare)
- Support (supervision / induction packs / social events / room hire)

If an organisation wants to work within a volunteer involvement good practice framework, it needs to recruit volunteers and provide them with training and support. Many volunteer roles will also call for supervision and detailed selection procedures (e.g. police checks). Volunteers should also be offered reimbursement for their out-of-pocket expenses.

What other issues need to be addressed before involving volunteers?

An important question is, "do we need volunteers?". Only when this fundamental point has been resolved can organisations move forward to look at other issues.

At this stage potential conflicts can arise. Issues around ethics, professionalism, roles and responsibilities, volunteer tasks and boundaries, need to be discussed, defined and agreed upon. Fears expressed concerning volunteers replacing paid workers must also be allayed. It is preferable to have consensus regarding these matters, as allowing serious differences to continue may well produce adverse consequences for the organisation and its clients/users.

Should analysis suggest that involving volunteers will be a positive experience for all involved and the costs are manageable, the next stage is to look at how volunteers will be integrated into the organisation.

Firstly, it needs to be ensured any staff members being allocated responsibility for supervising and/or working with volunteers, have the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to do this. These duties should also be written into workers' job descriptions and person specifications. This means staff may not only have to be relieved of other tasks but should, ideally, undergo any training relevant to managing volunteers.

Recruiting volunteers is the first step. There are a number of issues to consider and identify before deciding whether or not to involve volunteers.

- The reasons for the existence of the organisation and its 'purpose'
- What service the organisation is providing for the user/client group
- What the organisation stands for and how this is demonstrated
- Its 'ethos'
- Why the organisation wishes to use volunteers and what the benefits will be
- What the organisation is trying to do for volunteers (e.g. training and support, opportunities to develop skills, promote Equal Opps etc.)
- The needs of the organisation, in order of priority
- The needs of the client / user group, in order of priority
- The needs of potential volunteers, in order of priority
- Examine the areas which can realistically be taken on by volunteers (draw up a portfolio of volunteer tasks and job descriptions to help focus on this)
- Examine areas of potential conflict (e.g. unease from paid staff feeling their work will be undermined or their jobs replaced by volunteers,
- If the needs of users exceed resources available to the organisation;
- Ensuring a adequate package of training and support for both volunteers and paid staff;
- How to effectively manage volunteers and develop the project)
- Examine ways in which any potential conflict might be overcome (e.g. training and support should not be compromised but seen as essential to delivering an effective service; the management of volunteers should not become too bureaucratic, formalised or over professional; seek the views of clients/users; there may be potential to narrow the scope or scale of the work)

Voluntary organisations need to be aware of the pressures volunteers might face when asked to cover tasks that are/were being done by paid staff. Individual volunteers may feel pressured, under moral obligation or "emotionally persuaded" to do tasks if paid staff are not employed to do them. In certain circumstances this "coercion" can lead to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, anxiousness and undue stress, especially if, for example, the work involves dealing with vulnerable people. Volunteers need to be aware of the reasons for this kind of situation and given **full support** in dealing with any difficulties they may encounter as a result of this.

When a range of volunteer roles has been identified it may be a good idea to put these together into a portfolio form. This provides a ready record of tasks available to volunteers which, in turn, can be added to, evaluated, reviewed, refined and amended as and when deemed necessary.

In addition to this, an organisation could draw up written job descriptions for volunteer tasks. This enables paid staff and volunteers to be clear about the nature of work assigned, and level of responsibility given, to volunteers. Through having a clear job description, volunteers are provided with a means to seek support if they find they are not given those tasks but are being asked to do other things not within their remit.

Organisations may also wish to ascertain for themselves the type of volunteers they wish to recruit. This, for example, could relate to volunteers with specific experience, knowledge, skills or qualifications; volunteers from ethnic minorities, women, young people, drivers etc. To enable clarification on the kind of volunteer wanted for a specific role, an organisation may wish to draw up a 'person specification' for each of the identified roles.

(Issues relating to 'portfolios of volunteer tasks', 'job descriptions' for volunteers and 'person specifications' are looked at in further detail in the "Recruiting & Selecting Volunteers" good practice paper.)

Volunteers have the right to a 'voice' within the organisation and, as such, they should be enabled to contribute to the decision and policy-making process. Moreover, volunteers need to be aware of this and they should be encouraged accordingly. This is particularly relevant if a volunteer is, or has been, a service user of the organisation, as they will have insight into the level and quality of service provided. Supervision and/or volunteer support sessions provide a useful arena for informing volunteers of the contribution they can make to the organisation.

Finally, when deciding on which roles and tasks are appropriate for volunteers, consideration needs to be given to other areas such as selection, induction, training etc. The person specifications and job descriptions in part cover these issues but questions around writing for references, police checks, training, insurance cover,

drawing up organisation/volunteer agreements etc. need to be addressed before any firm decision is made regarding involving volunteers in the organisation.

A summary of when it may & may not be appropriate to use volunteers.

It may be appropriate to use volunteers when

- The organisation can adequately resource managing volunteers.
- There is adequate **induction, training, support** and **supervision** available.
- There is appropriate **selection** procedures in place.
- Their **expenses can be paid** and special clothing/equipment provided.
- Adequate insurance cover exists.
- There is someone who has a clear line of responsibility for the volunteer and that the volunteer is fully aware of what this line is.
- There is a mutual (written?) agreement between volunteer and organisation on hours of work, duties, responsibilities etc.
- Paid staff are **committed** to the value and ethos of volunteering.
- All staff **agree** regarding the nature and purpose of volunteer involvement.
- Specific tasks are identified for which volunteers can take responsibility.
- Tasks assigned to volunteers do **not** replace the work of paid staff
- The task is something the volunteer both wants to do and is of benefit to the community.
- There is an opportunity for volunteers to use and develop their skills/talents.
- Organisations enable volunteers to participate in the decision making process.

It is perhaps not appropriate if

- There is less than adequate money, staffing, support and no training or supervision for volunteers.

- Expenses, necessary clothing/equipment or adequate insurance cover are not provided.
- The work is widely considered to be the responsibility of the statutory services
- The proposed volunteer tasks are those formerly, or currently, done by a paid worker.
- Involving volunteers may jeopardise the employment conditions of paid staff
- There is disagreement regarding the nature and purpose of volunteering, and the involvement of volunteers within the organisation.
- The volunteer perceives little value in the work, or is not allowed opportunities to develop their skills and talents.
- Tasks are such that volunteers are expected to make unrealistic commitments in terms of time or level of responsibility.
- The work is intended to make a profit (other than fund raising events).
- Volunteers are asked to do tasks for people who have the means to pay for the work.
- There is no commitment to ensuring opportunities for volunteering being available to ALL sections of the community, i.e. there is no Equal Opportunities Policy.
- Unacceptable risks are involved, e.g. physical danger or violence etc.
- Volunteers can play no part in the decision/policy making process of the organisation.

What tasks are appropriate for volunteers and how can this be decided?

Whilst it would be extremely useful for there to be a complete list of volunteer tasks, this is not realistic as it would be an improbable task to compile something so exhaustive. The suitability of a task is influenced by the nature and purpose of the organisation, therefore, they should focus on good practice principles needed to identify suitable tasks for volunteers. This also allows them to recognise those tasks which are inappropriate.

It may be tempting to give tasks to volunteers that are easy to pick up and which involve little training (e.g. filing) and under certain circumstances this may be appropriate. The danger in doing this is that volunteers can easily become bored with the work and may feel they have a low status within the organisation. Conversely, giving volunteers tasks which they find over taxing or hold too much responsibility may well discourage them from getting, or staying, involved. In other words, be wary of "throwing them in at the deep end"! People will differ in what they find too routine or over challenging, so it is important to be as flexible as possible. Focus on the needs of the volunteer and identify a range of tasks that they can undertake. Ideally an organisation wanting to involve volunteers should ensure that it can offer work which volunteers will find valuable, rewarding and challenging, but not over stressful or demanding.

Thus, there are a number of pertinent issues regarding the roles of volunteers for organisations to consider. First and foremost, volunteers should not be used to cover the work of paid staff. Neither should they be undertaking tasks currently being, or previously been, done by paid workers.

Volunteers are there to complement the work of paid staff, not to replace them. Of course volunteers may work alongside workers but their roles should have clear boundaries. Many volunteers, for example, work in caring capacities, often with paid care-assessment workers. The volunteer's role could be one of supporting an individual being assessed, this also means they may have a vital role to play in assessing that person's needs. This role would, however, be quite distinct from and would not "take over" the job of the paid worker.

Contracting and cutbacks in funding, have led to voluntary organisations receiving an increased number of requests for volunteers to cover tasks, which have previously been done by paid workers. Voluntary organisations need to take a stand on this issue in order to maintain the integrity and importance of volunteering.

Organisations also need to recognise that by enabling volunteers to take on tasks previously done by paid workers, they may well be jeopardising future funding, credibility of the work and employment prospects within the organisation itself. This may occur, for example, when there are claims that certain work done by paid staff is "non-essential", or there are no longer sufficient moneys to employ workers, while reckoning that volunteers will step in to cover these tasks.