

Supporting Volunteers' Factsheet

Support for volunteers is vitally important and how this is provided depends upon the context of the volunteering opportunity and the individual.

Volunteers should always feel that they are integral members of an organisation and its work, and are therefore highly valued, so offering proper volunteer support can ensure a good experience for the volunteer.

Support should last the entire volunteer journey, until they say farewell to the organisation.

Ways in which you can support your volunteers

Volunteer induction

Starting with an induction process is an important part of good practice and introduces new volunteers to your organisation and their role. Please see our separate volunteer induction checklist for more information.

One to One Support

There should be a specific, named, experienced member of staff that the volunteer can go to with questions, queries or problems. It can be a different person to the Volunteer Coordinator and separate to 'buddy' support.

Regular Supervision Sessions

Offering regular supervision sessions help to ensure good two-way communication and provides an opportunity to find out how the volunteer is, whether they are enjoying the role and if they have any training needs. The frequency and level of the sessions may depend on the nature of the role itself, any risk involved, the individual's needs and the capacity of their supervisor/volunteer manager.

Volunteer Newsletter

If time allows, a newsletter can be a great way to let volunteers know what is happening in the organisation, thank individual volunteers for their contribution and celebrate the valuable work that volunteers do. It can be standalone or a volunteer section in the main organisational newsletter

Ways in which you can support your volunteers

Encouraging Feedback

Encouraging feedback, good or bad, helps the volunteer feel they are an important part of the organisation and that their opinion is valued. It can be acquired through formal supervision meetings, volunteer questionnaires or through informal 'catch-ups'.

It is a useful way to learn what the volunteer enjoys about volunteering and what might be causing them problems. Encouraging feedback can also prevent any small issues becoming more serious which could cause the volunteer to leave the organisation, if not resolved.

'Buddy' Support

It is good practice to ensure there is always somebody on hand to offer support to volunteers, even if it is on the end of a phone. One effective means of supporting a new volunteer is to pair them with a 'buddy' - a more experienced volunteer who is willing to take an interest and provide advice and encouragement.

This can also be a great way for an existing volunteer to develop in the organisation, freeing up the volunteer manager to focus on other areas of support.

Group Volunteer Meetings

Encouraging the volunteers to come together as a group can be a useful way for them to share ideas as peers and have input into the work of the organisation. However this should be balanced with 1:1 support either in supervision or with 'buddy' support. Not all volunteers would feel comfortable sharing in a group and this forum would not be suitable for individual or personal issues.

Social Events (Volunteers and Staff)

Involving volunteers in social events at your organisation is a great way to bring everyone together informally and encourage a team spirit and a sense of belonging. Many volunteers join an organisation for the social benefits and to meet new people. Even if the volunteer is not normally in on the day of an event, they would appreciate the invitation and opportunity to attend.

A Person-centred Approach

Supporting volunteers should be a structured and clearly defined process for all volunteers but offering a more person-centred approach can also be valuable, depending on the nature of the role or the individual volunteer.

It is important to discuss the needs of the volunteer when they start and identify ways in which the organisation can offer further support to them, if required.

Some volunteers will be full of confidence and may not need any additional support but others may need more encouragement or reassurance at the start.

Volunteers' needs may change over time as they become more experienced, take on new roles, or if their personal circumstances change, so any continued support should reflect this.

Supporting Volunteers with Additional Needs

It is important that all volunteers have equal access to a basic level of support, whether structured or person-centred. However there may be volunteers that require further support over and above these.

Speaking to the volunteer during the recruitment stage can help you understand their requirements better and is key to checking: whether the organisation has capacity to provide extra support and also ensuring that this is in place before they start.

If the volunteer has a disability, don't make assumptions on what support they need and don't be afraid to ask the volunteer's opinion on what terminology they prefer to use – respectful language is extremely important and personal to the volunteer.

Following up regularly with the volunteer can help check that the right support is in place and ensure adjustments are made to ensure a great volunteering experience.

Supporting Remote Volunteers

There are many roles where volunteers work remotely or from home and it is important to ensure they also feel supported. Regular check-ins by phone or text can keep the volunteer feeling engaged and less isolated. Regular supervision could be held online (for example via Zoom) or in the office (if this is an option).

Inviting remote volunteers to attend social events is equally important so they have an opportunity to feel connected with the organisation and the team.

Saying Goodbye

There may come a time when a volunteer chooses to leave, due to a change in their personal circumstances, to take a paid job, move house or pursue other interests / priorities. Having a final meeting with the volunteer to wish them well and gather any feedback on their volunteer journey is important to understanding what kind of experience they have had with the organisation. It is also an opportunity to reflect on their feedback and propose any improvements to future volunteering practice.

Finally, taking time out to thank the volunteer with other members of the team is be a really nice way to say farewell and end the volunteer relationship on a positive note, opening up an opportunity for them to return in the future.