



# ***Good Practice Guidelines***

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## **Creating a Fair and Welcoming Application Process**

The application process that you have for volunteers will depend very much on your organisation and the work that volunteers undertake within it. Some organisations have more people wanting to volunteer than they can take on so need to select; some organisations need to screen potential volunteers carefully because of the work that they are doing and some organisations take on anybody who is interested. However, all organisations need to develop a system that suits their needs but also does not put off potential volunteers or place unnecessary barriers in people's way. In the past many groups have just adapted application forms and interview techniques from the way that they recruit paid staff. However, this is rarely appropriate and overly formal application processes discourage a lot of people who otherwise may well be interested in volunteering. Many volunteer managers forget that the application process is as much about the volunteer deciding whether they like the organisation, as about the organisation deciding to take on the volunteer. An ideal application process will reflect both. Organisations put a lot of time and effort into recruiting volunteers, but the wrong kind of application process may well mean that a lot of people showing an interest are put off before they start.

### **Initial Enquiries**

All too often organisations launch recruitment campaigns without properly considering what they will do when people respond to them. Most potential volunteers will make initial contact via the phone so it is important that their enquiry is dealt with in a way that will make them want to find out more. Make sure that whoever is answering the phone knows what to do and who to pass the call on to. If possible avoid asking people to call back; the chances are they just won't. If no one is immediately available it is better to take a contact number and get back to them.

Potential volunteers won't necessarily call within office hours, so remember to include instructions for people interested in volunteering in your answerphone message so that they know they have got through to the right place. If you say that you are going to call back make sure that you do. It is very disheartening for people to offer their time and then to feel that the organisation could not be bothered with them. Not only will they not contact you again but also quite possibly they will not contact any other organisations either.

Avoid asking potential volunteers too many questions over the phone. They will not be expecting to be interviewed so it is not really fair. Remember that many people find communicating on the phone quite difficult. However, you may want to check that they know about anything essential i.e. if you only need volunteers on a Wednesday afternoon there is no point in them continuing with the application process if they work all day Wednesdays.

It is a good idea to have an information pack available to send to people interested in volunteering. The pack could contain information about the organisation, the volunteer role, practical information about expenses and training, and maybe information from existing volunteers about what they get out of volunteering for your organisation. Avoid putting in formal policies as it is better to deal with these in the volunteer's induction. You should view the information pack as an extension of your recruitment materials. You need to provide information for the potential volunteer to decide if your organisation is right for them but at this stage you are still selling volunteering within your organisation.

If you have the resources it can be helpful to invite potential volunteers to come and visit your organisation and talk to existing volunteers before deciding whether they want to apply to volunteer for you. Not everybody wants to, but for some people an informal visit with no strings attached is a good first step and makes them feel in control of the situation. Remember that for many people who have never volunteered, applying to an organisation is a nerve-wracking business and they do not know quite what to expect. Anything that you can do to put them at their ease will be much appreciated and should ultimately result in more committed and informed volunteers who really feel that they have a stake in the organisation.

## **Application Forms**

Organisations usually use application forms when recruiting paid staff because it is not possible to interview every applicant, and some need to be weeded out. Most organisations do not have large numbers of volunteers applying for individual positions so do not need to use volunteer application forms in this way. However, most volunteer application forms are based on forms used for paid staff and many ask for more information than is needed or is appropriate. A logical first step when dealing with potential volunteers is to get them to fill out an application form. This is a good way of recording basic information like name, address etc. but in most cases it is not the best way of assessing a volunteer's suitability for a role.

Most organisations find that it is possible to get the information they need when they meet the volunteer in person, rather than getting them to fill out a form themselves. By asking someone to fill out a complex form you may be unintentionally putting barriers in the way for people who have problems with their sight, for whom English is not their first language, or whose level of literacy is not high (all of whom may have lots of other skills and experience that you would not want to lose). Remember that the overall aim of any fair selection process is to allow all potential volunteers to give the best of themselves; application forms do not allow everybody to do this.

Forms can also be off-putting for people. They look very formal, take a long time to fill out and have definite associations with applying for paid work. Remember that at this stage potential volunteers are still making their minds up about your organisation. An unnecessary application form could put them off. You may find that people are much more forthcoming about why they want to volunteer and their skills and experience when chatting to you, than on paper.

If you are going to use a form to take details, be clear about what information you need and why. For example, many organisations ask for a volunteer's date of birth when all they actually need to know is if someone is above or below a minimum or maximum age.

Information you need for equal opportunities monitoring purposes should be asked on a separate form kept separately from other personal details and the reasons for asking should be clearly stated.

## **Interviews**

Any interview with a volunteer is a two way process, an opportunity for both parties to find out more. In most instances it will differ from interviews for paid posts in that you will not be selecting from a number of people to fill one vacancy. This needs to be clear to potential volunteers. If it is clearly a selection process and not all volunteers will be taken on by the organisation, people should be made aware of this at the outset.

The word interview can be very off-putting, asking potential volunteers to come in to talk to you, or for a chat makes the process sound much friendlier. It is also helpful to remind them that this is their chance to interview you and find out if the organisation is right for them. Make sure that you have set aside enough time and are not going to be interrupted. Volunteer managers often have very chaotic working lives. A potential volunteer may not understand this and may view interruptions and distractions as a sign that you are not that interested in them. Also make sure that you have everything that you will need for the interview including any forms, reports or policies that you may need to give the potential volunteer.

The interview can be structured and organised without being unnecessarily formal. The beginning of the interview can be used to remind people of the purpose of the meeting, and check that you have people's personal details correctly recorded. The interview will then be dual purpose. You will need to tell the potential volunteer about your organisation and answer any of their questions so that they can decide if they are interested in you. You will also need to ask the volunteer about themselves and what they have to offer, so you can decide if you are interested in taking them on.

You may want to tell them about:

- The organisation and the role of volunteers
- The user group
- Training and support offered
- Your expectations of volunteers (including a brief outline of policies that impact on volunteers)
- Time commitment (frequency and duration)
- Resources available to volunteers

You may want them to tell you:

- What they like about the idea of volunteering with this particular agency or doing this type of work
- What they hope to gain from volunteering
- Relevant skills, interests and experience

- Understanding of relevant issues or user groups
- Time availability
- Resources they will need (induction loop, reimbursement of care costs, support from outside the organisation)
- Names of potential referees

If recording information from the interview, it is important that you record only factual information and not opinion and that you assure the interviewee that what they say will remain confidential.

At the end of the discussion both you and the volunteer together should be in a position to agree whether you want to proceed further. If you are not certain that the volunteer has the skills or experience to carry out the role you will need to explain this, making it clear that your assessment is based on the requirements of the role description and person specification (do think carefully about whether the role description can be adapted if the volunteer has some of the necessary attributes). Occasionally you may feel that you want to talk to a colleague or trustee, or feel that it may be useful for the potential volunteer to meet an established volunteer before proceeding. A trial period may also be useful for both parties. This is perfectly reasonable but it is important to be open with potential volunteers about what you are suggesting and why.

At the end of the interview you should be in a position to:

- Check whether the volunteer has any further questions or information to give you
- Check that they have the necessary information to take away
- Agree what will happen next and when you expect to be in touch again

*Volunteer Centre Sheffield has a range of resources available on different aspects of working with volunteers. Please contact the Centre if you would like additional support or advice.*

*Thanks to Volunteering England for the use of this information sheet*