Carmarthenshire Association of Voluntary Services

Your local county voluntary council

4. Volunteers

4.8 Keeping volunteers safe

There are different types of risk associated with what volunteers do, and ways to reduce these risks. For example:

- Some volunteering is just plain dangerous! Emergency rescuers such as RNLI, cave and mountain rescue or surf lifesaving, all involve situations where the risk is inherent in the activity.
- The way the activity is done will determine whether or not it is safe. Tried and tested procedures for carrying out the activity will reduce the potential for harm.
- Some activities are more vulnerable to abuse than others. Children and vulnerable adults must be safeguarded from harm. The assets of an organisation are also at risk from theft or fraud.

Risk assessment

- Look for any hazards – anything which could cause harm to someone. Consider the tasks being done and what *actually* happens, not what ought to happen. People may be trained to do something a certain way, but they may not be following this guidance – assess how they actually go about their work.
- Consider who could be harmed, be it staff, volunteers or members of the public. Look at who may be at risk and why.
- For every hazard identified, evaluate the chance of it happening and decide if existing procedures are enough to reduce the risk of someone being harmed – what could be the worst thing to happen and how likely it is to happen?
- Record what hazards have been identified and what will be done about them. It may be possible to get rid of the risk altogether by changing the way the task is done, or by bringing in precautions to reduce the chances of harm being done. Prioritise what needs to be done by deciding the most important things to tackle first. Even after this, some risk will usually remain – take adequate precautions so that the risk is as small as possible.
- Review – regularly check that the systems put in place to deal with risks are working, and keep assessing risks, especially for new projects, tasks and volunteers.

If the risks are high it might be worth just checking the following:

- Is it appropriate for a volunteer to undertake this work or could others do it?
- What would happen if the activity wasn't carried out?
- What will the volunteer gain from carrying out this work?

- How will the organisation/ client/community benefit from volunteers doing this work?

If it is appropriate for volunteers to be involved in this activity – press on!

The volunteers themselves

Cases of accidents involving volunteers are mercifully rare although there is a sense sometimes that this is more a case of luck than good management practice. It is not unheard of for volunteers to have access to mechanical equipment without proper training or protective clothing, or to be involved in activities which they are patently unsuited for.

Good recruitment and selection procedures should aim to discover enough about a potential volunteer to identify what training is needed for them to do the job safely, ruling out volunteers who are simply unsuited for the particular volunteering you have in mind (but who may excel given something else to do!) In short – the volunteers themselves should be risk assessed!

Everyone has a right to volunteer, but not everyone will have the ability the task needs.

Checklist

- Does this activity require specific skills or expertise?
- How will we know if the volunteer has the necessary skills/expertise?
- What training is required to help the volunteer develop the skills and is it locally available?
- Could everyone learn these skills?

The volunteering environment

The environment in which the volunteering takes place must be as safe and as free from potential hazard as is possible. This includes ensuring the safety of any equipment the volunteer uses and a risk assessment of activities outside of the normal place of work. Electrical equipment, motor vehicles, tools, protective clothing must all be in good working order.

The boundaries of volunteering activities need also to be clearly defined and understood by everyone involved – staff, other volunteers and any beneficiaries. Because the whole essence of volunteering is about being helpful volunteers can be tempted to go beyond agreed limits. As soon as this happens the risk assessment is no longer valid.

Checklist

- Is the equipment used by volunteers regularly maintained?
- Is there a budget to replace unsafe equipment?
- Do volunteers know the limits of their activities?
- Are they aware of the implications of going beyond the limits?
- Do clients and recipients know and understand the limitations of volunteers?

Summary

- Use procedures that are specific to the activity and rigorously tested.
- Recruit volunteers who are fit, able, and trainable for the tasks
- Have procedures for maintaining equipment, role descriptions and good induction for volunteers.

Further information

Health and Safety Executive
www.hse.gov.uk

Disclaimer
The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

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