Conwy Voluntary Services Council

Your local county voluntary council

4. Volunteers

4.6 Equality and Diversity in volunteering

www.cvsc.org.uk

Equality is about treating people fairly, ensuring that they have equal access to opportunities and resources, regardless of age, gender, race religion disability etc. Equality legislation requires organisations to act in ways that are transparent , consistent and fair regardless of individuals identity or background. [1]

Although equality legislation does not specifically cover volunteers, there is a moral imperative for organisations to act in regard to volunteers in ways which uphold principles of equality, including:

- being proactive in reducing barriers that prevent certain sectors of our communities from getting involved in volunteering
- being vigilant in addressing behaviour which is discriminatory, whether this be the behaviour of staff, volunteers or service users

Diversity is about celebrating difference. It is about more than 'fair play' and 'compliance' but has more to do with creating an ethos which values and welcomes the uniqueness of individuals.

Embracing diversity means drawing upon the widest possible range of views, backgrounds and experiences, so that an organisation can listen to, and meet, the changing needs of its users, staff, volunteers, partners and supporters.

The effective management of diversity can help counteract prejudice against a wide range of personal differences including those characteristics which are addressed by equality legislation and also, for example:

level of qualification, accent, language, marital status, physical and mental abilities, political affiliation, mental illness, spent or irrelevant convictions and, trade union affiliation.

Benefits of diversity in volunteering

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's (CIPD) argues that diversity should be embraced not only for reasons of social justice but also because it makes business sense. For example, volunteers with different backgrounds, skills, attitudes and experiences bring fresh ideas and perceptions. Organisations can encourage and harness these differences to make their services relevant and approachable.

Other benefits include:

- presenting a more welcoming face to volunteers, client groups and the general public
- being more representative of the community
- the ability to understand and respond better to the needs of the local community
- improved volunteer recruitment, satisfaction and retention

How to increase the diversity of volunteers

Having a diversity statement or policy, whilst a good start, is not enough on its own. You will need to take an organisation wide strategic approach, to include the following aspects:

Attracting new volunteers:
Attracting a more diverse volunteer team requires active and targeted recruitment. Which languages are you using? What impression does your publicity material give? Are your messages inclusive? Is there visible diversity in the images you use?

Where and how are you advertising for volunteers? Who is this expected to reach? Is the language, message and approach appropriate for this target group?

Monitor the diversity of your volunteers and analyse you data to identify unrepresented sections of the community. This will help to inform your recruitment strategy.

Review the range of volunteer roles you have available. Are there roles to attract people of different age, gender, background, ability and interest? Do they include opportunities for one –off or short term involvement as well as for regular commitment?

Welcoming volunteers on board

Make sure you welcome all your volunteers and give them a good induction. You might consider introducing a mentoring or buddy scheme, to help those new to your organisation to find their feet and fell that they belong.

Training and induction methods will need to take into account that people learn in different ways. They will differ also in the extent to which they are comfortable with, for example, reading long documents, or speaking aloud in a group. A variety of training methods is advisable and the flexibility to use alternative approaches as and when necessary.

Volunteering should be, from the volunteer's perspective, informal and 'user-friendly'. Too much bureaucracy and 'small print' can easily exclude people. (However, 'behind the scenes' you will need rigorous management processes!)

At the outset, consider volunteers' need for support and supervision. This will vary according to the role, and according to the needs and personality of the volunteer.

Ask volunteers if they have any particular support needs and discuss ways in which these might be addressed (for example by provision of modified equipment , or by adapting the volunteer role.

Working with volunteers

When organising meetings and events for volunteers, consider the effect of your decisions on the range of volunteers, for example, accessibility, cost, child care implications, appropriate food.

Can you pay expenses? Is prompt payment an important consideration for some volunteers? If so, could a small allowance be available 'up front'?

Involve volunteers in the development of your organisation (including its diversity strategies) by asking for their input to your discussion and decision making.

Consider how an ethos of diversity is nurtured within your organisation?

Learning from experience

Creating an open and inclusive culture helps to create a positive and harmonious working environment. However, things do sometimes go wrong. When they do arise, problems need to be handled with care, and lessons can often be learned from them.

All volunteers should be made aware how to raise a concern or complaint, and with whom. Similarly volunteers should be made aware what is expected of them and what will happen if they display inappropriate behaviour, including discriminatory behaviour.

When volunteers leave, for whatever reason, you may gain valuable insight into their experience, including any negative aspects, by carrying out some kind of 'exit interview'.

References

[1] The framework for equality legislation is described here

Further information

Promoting Equality and Diversity in Volunteering – a guide for volunteer involving organisations in Wales. This is a more in-depth and comprehensive guide, based on the Investing in Volunteers framework, which will enable organisations to develop good practice in this aspect of volunteer management

Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
www.cipd.co.uk

Investing in Volunteers www.investinginvolunteers.org.uk There is an underlying theme of equality and diversity throughout the standard. Indicator Three focuses most explicitly on diversity issues.

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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