Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations

Your local county voluntary council

4. Volunteers

4.8 Keeping volunteers safe

Assessing and managing risk is a vital part of the day to day ‘duty of care’ to volunteers.

No activity is risk – free, but with forward planning and anticipation of what might go wrong, significant risks can be eliminated and the impact of harmful incidents can be reduced.

Different types of risk are associated with volunteers. For example:

Risks to volunteers

- Some volunteering activities are inherently risky, such as emergency rescue, or sporting activities
- The environment in which volunteering takes place may be unsafe
- Volunteers may be inadequately prepared to carry out activities, or to use equipment in a safe manner
- There may be inadequate clarity about the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that a volunteer operates beyond the safe level of their training or competence
- Volunteers’ personal data may not be kept confidential

Risks to the organisation

- Reputation may be damaged if volunteers misrepresent the organisation or speak or act inappropriately
- Breaches of confidentiality
- Theft, fraud or the misuse of resources

Risks to clients or beneficiaries

- Abuse of clients or beneficiaries by a volunteer
- Provision of inaccurate information or advice
- Inadequate standards of care, service or behaviour

Risk of harm to colleagues

- Stepping outside the boundaries/exceeding the authority of a volunteer role
- Substandard performance by a volunteer which requires others to ‘pick up the pieces’
- Discriminatory behaviour or harassment

The use of appropriate guidelines and training on safe practices, ongoing monitoring or supervision and the use of safe equipment are all measures that can be taken to reduce the likelihood of problems arising.
Alternatively, you may consider adapting a volunteer activity, or even stopping it altogether if the risk is judged to be unacceptable

Carrying out a Risk Assessment

The process of risk assessment helps to identify significant risks and provides a framework for identifying steps that can be taken to reduce these.
A 'reasonable' approach is called for. The aim is **not** to impose unrealistic or excessive regulations or restrictions on volunteers or to create an onerous burden for the organisation.

Risk assessment involves four clear steps:

1. Identifying the potential **hazards**
2. **Categorising** these according to their likelihood and their impact
3. Identifying and implementing **measures** for managing the risks
4. **Reviewing** your risk assessment in the light of experience and making changes as necessary

1 Look for the **hazards** – ie 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.
2 For every hazard identified, estimate the chance of harm (score, for example on a scale 1– 5) and how serious the resulting harm would be (again score 1-5). Multiplying these two scores gives a way of assessing the relative risks. The higher the score, the greater the risk
3 Note what existing measures are in place to control or reduce each risk and anything else that could reasonably be done. Prioritise actions that you will take – the focus should be on reducing the most serious risks and also on undertaking actions which are simple and easy to undertake.
4 The results of a risk assessment need to be communicated to all concerned and periodically reviewed by all concerned (staff and volunteers). The involvement of several people, with their different perspectives, will make the risk assessment more robust.

A template for carrying out a risk assessment may be downloaded here and adapted for your own purposes.

What to risk assess?

Organisation – wide risks

As an organisation you may have specific policies which address issues such as social media and internet use, lone working, confidentiality, safeguarding, health and safety, data protection. All of these involve to some extent, identifying risk and appropriate management procedures. But these alone are not enough.

Assessing activities and environments

A template such as the one above can be used to risk assess an event or activity – focussing on the activity and the environment in which it will take place. This may be a one off event or outing, or a regular activity.

For regular events it can be helpful to produce from your initial risk assessment a 'check list' of what the event organiser need to do to ensure that the event runs safely and smoothly.

Assessing the volunteer role

A volunteer role should be written down, for the sake of clarification (a template can be found here). It can then be used as a basis for assessing associated risk. This will often, for example, help to inform priorities for induction and training. It will often help to identify the scope of the role including some appropriate boundaries (i.e. the limits beyond which risks become unacceptable). Agreed boundaries of a volunteer role need to be clearly communicated to volunteers and if necessary, to clients and staff.

Many of the identified risks may be addressed by existing organisational policies. However, to be effective, these too must be communicated to volunteers as appropriate.

The volunteer role description is a valuable tool in recruitment. If particular experience or qualities are necessary, it should say so. Recruiting volunteers who are well suited to the role can be an important element of risk management. This is especially true in cases where the volunteer role carries high level of risk (eg. physical exertion) or responsibility (eg. involvement with vulnerable clients).

Assessing individuals

In some cases a risk assessment which focuses on individuals will be necessary. Risk assessment will be routinely performed on clients prior to volunteers making home visits, for example. Relevant information then needs to be communicated to the volunteer.

In the case of a volunteer with special needs, a risk assessment of their capabilities in relation to the activities they will undertake or environments in which they will operate will help to identify any support or adaptations that are required. This is an important demonstration of commitment to equal opportunities.

Further information

The Investing in Volunteers Standard requires that an assessment of potential risk to volunteers is conducted when designing volunteer roles (Indicator 5.1) and that there is clarity about the boundaries of volunteer roles (Indicator 7.3)

See also Information sheet 4.8.1 Risk assessment – volunteers based at home

Health and Safety Executive
www.hse.gov.uk

Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

There are responsibilities laid upon the employer towards people who are not employees, who may be affected by the employers activities - such as volunteers, and members of the public:

' …to conduct his undertaking in such a way as to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that persons not in his employment who may be affected thereby are not thereby exposed to risks to their health and safety'

'*…to give persons (not being his employees) who may be affected by the way in which he conducts his undertaking the prescribed information about such aspects of the way in which he conducts his undertaking as might affect their health or safety*

Appendix 1

Some questions to consider in the course of Risk Identification

The volunteer:

- Is there any essential requirement when selecting volunteers for this role – or anything that would preclude placing a volunteer
- Does the volunteer have special needs or requirements

The nature of the role:

- Is there risk of violent or abusive behaviour
- Is confidentiality important
- Is there a risk of physical harm or injury e.g. lifting, eye strain (from extensive use of VDU screen), repetitive strain injury
- Is the volunteering role likely to be emotionally demanding

The environment:

- Is the volunteering environment suitable for the task (e.g. workstation, safe storage, privacy)

Equipment:

- Is equipment appropriate, safe, and suitable for the task
- Is protective/safety equipment needed

Other:

- Will there be costs incurred, can they be reimbursed
- Are there significant limits or boundaries to what is expected in this volunteer role

Some possible actions to control or minimise risk:

- Providing safety information
- Ensuring back up support / supervision
- Providing / checking equipment
- Meeting expenses
- Agreeing record keeping /reporting requirements
- Agreeing/ reinforcing some ‘ground rules’
- Training and induction
- Amending the role description
- Develop/amend organisational policies
- Emergency procedures

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.

For further information contact

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Produced by WCVA, County Voluntary Councils and Volunteer Centres.
Last Updated:14/09/2016

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