

Wales Council for Voluntary Action

Supporting charities, volunteers and communities



4. Volunteers

4.9 Volunteering to work with vulnerable adults and children

The welfare of children and vulnerable adults must be the paramount consideration of any voluntary organisation whose work brings it into contact with vulnerable people. Volunteers play a vital role in enhancing the lives of vulnerable people, but not every volunteer is suited to this kind of work, and very occasionally, may actually pose a threat. This means carrying out risk assessments for work that involves vulnerable people, adopting safe working practices to help to minimise risk, having good recruitment and selection practices, and sound systems of supervision.

This information sheet provides advice on how to develop safe working practices which will help to reduce risks. It draws heavily on government guidelines and code of practice in *Safe From Harm* and *Our Duty To Care*.

1. Adopt a policy statement on safeguarding the welfare of children and vulnerable adults

It is essential that voluntary organisations develop a positive attitude toward client safety, which includes taking steps towards creating an environment in which children and vulnerable adults are valued in every respect.

An element of this is to have a policy statement on the protection of children and vulnerable adults which is brought to the attention of all volunteers and staff during the selection, induction and training processes.

2. Develop good management practices

a) Risk assessment

Good management practices will significantly reduce opportunities for harm occurring to people in your care, whether they are clients or volunteers. Where volunteers are working directly with vulnerable clients or are going into people's homes, the organisation must do everything possible to protect both the volunteers and the clients from abuse, injury or loss.

The best starting point is to consider everything that could possibly go wrong, assess the likelihood, and take reasonable steps to prevent the problem occurring.

Some steps which might be appropriate are:

- taking up references for volunteers;
- ensuring all volunteers who will be working with vulnerable clients are interviewed by an experienced employee, volunteer or committee member;

- asking volunteers about previous convictions;
- finding out as much as possible about clients and ensuring volunteers have relevant information;
- ensuring volunteers do not go into risky situations without someone knowing where they are, and being authorised to take action if they do not call in or return at an agreed time;
- having someone other than the volunteer check with clients about whether they are satisfied and if there are any problems;
- keeping records of all incidents, and monitoring these for repeat incidents involving particular volunteers or clients;
- taking out appropriate insurance to protect the organisation and its volunteers in case of a client's successful claim for damages.

b) To police check or not to police check?

Organisations need to ensure particular rigour and vigilance when recruiting people to sensitive areas of employment such as work involving regular contact with children or vulnerable adults. The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act Exceptions Order 1974 overrules the employment rights an ex-offender would otherwise have in respect of spent convictions, in order for employers to have additional information when recruiting for certain 'exempted occupations'. These include those that bring the job-holder into contact with vulnerable groups. Where the employer states clearly on the application form or at interview that the job applied for is exempted, ex-offenders will have to

disclose information about spent as well as unspent convictions.

The level of Disclosure will be dependent on the position carried out and the level of contact that this person would have with children or vulnerable adults. It is important to remember that equal attention should be given to the rigour of the selection process regardless of whether individuals are applying for an employee position or as a volunteer.

3. Developing clear practices

There are some specific management practices which you can develop to raise the standards of your organisation in a number of ways, including the creation of a healthy and safe environment.

a) Planning and managing the activities of the organisation

Know your staff and volunteers:

- follow a thorough recruitment procedure;
- keep secure records of details provided at the time of recruitment;
- have a work schedule which should be clearly displayed so that everyone knows who is on duty;
- keep a record of any complaints about, or incidents involving volunteers.

Keeping records such as:

- attendance register;
- accident book;
- authorisation/consent forms;

4. Adopt and consistently apply a thorough and clearly defined method of recruiting and selecting staff and volunteers

This involves:

- taking all reasonable steps to ensure that unsuitable people are prevented from working with children;
- not assuming that some people can be excluded from undergoing a thorough selection procedure;
- taking into account a range of matters in addition to the protection of children from harm.

Points to consider are :

- defining the role;
- recruitment publicity – stating clearly a Disclosure is required where necessary;
- application form – clearly defining tasks;
- declaration – applicants should be asked to sign a declaration stating there is no reason why they would be unsuitable to work with children or vulnerable adults;
- interview process – focus on child protection policy;
- references – taken up in writing and followed up orally;
- trial period;
- records – details of the selection process should be recorded.

5. Support and supervision of volunteers

Volunteers in any situation should be given adequate support to enable them to carry out the tasks efficiently and with confidence. Support and supervision are separate but overlapping functions which are best simplified by seeing support as 'person-centred' and supervision as 'work-centred'. Both are essential in risk management.

Supervision should be structured and formal allowing reflection of the work in relation to standards and targets you have previously agreed with the volunteer. Each supervision session should conclude with a plan of future action. Keep records of issues and decisions made during supervision as these will be useful for tracking problems and progress.

6. Allegations or suspicions of abuse

In any case where an allegation is made, or someone in your organisation has concerns, a record should be made. As part of the induction process everyone in your organisation should be made aware of the person within the organisation who should always be informed of any concerns about a child/vulnerable adult being abused, and how they can be contacted.

Confidentiality and communication of information

In sharing significant information and in any investigation, the agency must act in good faith, without malice and on the basis that the interests of the vulnerable person are paramount. The individual concerned must be made aware of the concerns, but the notification should be timed so that it does not impede any investigation.

Reporting significant information within organisations

Information is confidential to any agency, not to an individual. Anyone who has significant information that indicates that an individual's behaviour may present a risk to a child or vulnerable adult must share it with relevant colleagues on a 'need to know' basis.

Further information

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Criminal Records Bureau

www.crb.gov.uk

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)

www.nspcc.org.uk

For further information contact

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