

What is a volunteer policy?

It is the main foundation that all the other building blocks for volunteering sit on. Your policy will outline clearly to all staff, volunteers and users of the service, why volunteers are involved. Also, if you're thinking about involving volunteers for the first time it's a great place to start so you can think through all aspects of involving volunteers.

Why is a volunteer policy important?

- Having a volunteer policy in place shows that you've thought about volunteering and that you care about your volunteers.
- For staff and volunteers it communicates how volunteers are involved in the organisation.
- For volunteers, they can find useful information about how they're engaged. For example, what the procedures are for expenses, what support's available or access to training.
- It helps you be consistent in how you work with volunteers.
- It can help clarify the boundaries between paid staff and volunteers.

Where should I start?

Take time to discuss your volunteer policy with others. If people are involved they are more likely to feel part of it and make it a live and relevant document. It's important to discuss why you're involving volunteers and how they'll sit alongside the running of the organisation.

Discussing it with those in senior positions helps ensure that the resources that are needed will be in place.

It's worth considering setting up a group that will be involved in creating and/or reviewing the policy. The group could be made up of a mix of senior people within the organisation, other staff and current volunteers. This will help make sure it reflects what the organisation needs.

There isn't a magical formula for a volunteer policy and the sections that are most important to you will depend on the work of your organisation. However, there are always some things that should be covered. It's useful to keep the main volunteer policy quite short and user friendly. You can refer to full policies and procedures that are elsewhere. It's worth thinking about compiling these into a Volunteer Handbook.

We've included some suggestions for areas to cover in your Volunteer Policy below.

Introduction to the organisation and why volunteers are involved	Start your policy with an explanation of what your organisation or group does, why it involves volunteers and the principles that underpin volunteer involvement.
Vision and mission for volunteering	You can then follow this up by being more specific about what you hope to achieve by involving volunteers.
The role of staff in delivering volunteering	This is an opportunity to explain the organisational structure and what people do, perhaps provide photographs of who's who and identify any key staff involved in supporting volunteers.
Volunteer roles	Outline how volunteer roles will be defined, agreed and promoted.
Matching the right volunteers to the right role	Information about how the organisation decides on the right volunteers for different roles and tasks. This may include an application form, informal interview, buddy scheme, taster sessions, trial periods, obtaining references and if appropriate carrying out Garda Vetting where a person is carry out volunteering with Children or Vulnerable Persons and has the possibility to build a relationship of trust during this volunteering.
Equality, diversity and Inclusion	You should set out the organisation's commitment to embracing diversity and promoting equality and inclusion. You may wish to have a separate equality and diversity policy with more information.
Positive induction and training	Let volunteers know what they can expect in the way of induction and training as a volunteer. Any compulsory training should be made clear.
Health and Safety and Insurance	This may include a statement that volunteers are covered by the organisation's insurance, details of specific safety guidelines for roles and your health and safety policy. You should also signpost volunteers to the risk assessment for their role or the accident and emergency procedures.
Expenses	Briefly explain what expenses the organisation is able to cover and how the volunteer claims them. Remember start as you mean to go on, will you be able to pay expenses where your programme grows? You will probably need a separate procedure to cover how volunteers make a claim.
Volunteering whilst on benefits	You may want to provide a statement to clarify that people can volunteer and claim benefits. It should be made clear that the only money received from volunteering is to cover expenses.
Support	Outline how the volunteer will be supported in their role. Explain how this support will be provided, for example in a regular meeting and always having a named point of contact on the day. This could also highlight how volunteers can support each other, give feedback or have input to decisions that affect them.
Saying thank you	Tell volunteers how you will appreciate and value their contribution. You could outline any informal or formal activities you do to acknowledge this and refer volunteers to a separate volunteer recognition policy.

Managing challenging situations	This should outline how the organisation will deal with concerns raised by, or about, volunteers and staff. This will show that you have a well-planned strategy around involving volunteers and have thought ahead about how you would deal with any problems.
Confidentiality	This should be a general statement referring to a separate confidentiality policy and should outline to volunteers the importance of confidentiality and their responsibility within the process. This should include confidentiality in relation to use of social media. Failure to keep confidentiality could be considered a serious matter and may result in the volunteer being asked to stop volunteering. You should explain how volunteer records will be stored and accessed in a way that complies with data protection legislation.
Photography	Photographs are a valuable tool to record volunteering activities. However, it is important to be clear about who can take photographs (and what they can take photographs of), how they will be stored and used and how permission will be sought.
Social media	This is a set of guidelines to clarify expectations if using social media whilst remaining respectful to the organisation, staff, other volunteers and clients. It should be made clear if the volunteer is expected to use social media as part of their role and that all private accounts should be kept separate from those within the organisation.
Endings	As much as you might want your volunteers to make a long-term commitment, sometimes they will move on, so your policy should include any procedures for this. It can also include commitment to providing references where appropriate.
Policy Review	The review process and timetable for review

What next?

The policy should be approved by the relevant committee and, if it is to be properly implemented, people need to know the policy exists and understand its purpose. Think about how you'll let everyone know about it and where it can be kept so everyone can access it.

One way to do this would be to include it in both volunteer and staff inductions.

Remember you will need to plan to review the policy, to ensure it is up to date. It is worthwhile involving volunteers and staff in the review process. Even if you don't make big changes, a regular review will allow for updates and emphasise its importance to the organisation or group.

Need some extra help?

If you would like more help or advice in relation to this guide please get with Waterford Volunteer Centre.