Guidelines for Carrying out a Survey

Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations are very aware of the need to get feedback from all of the stakeholders that it is involved with, including volunteers, beneficiaries, staff and community representatives.

This document highlights some of the areas which it would be useful for you to consider when deciding if a survey is the best way of getting the information you need. It also draws your attention to things to consider when planning your survey.

There are many advantages of using surveys:

- Can be cost effective way of reaching a large audience.
- A way of collecting a lot of information in a short space of time.
- Allows anonymity.
- Can be carried out by post, telephone or online.
- Allows statistical analysis.
- Allows respondents to answer at their convenience, at a time and location where they are comfortable.

However, like any research tool they also have disadvantages:

- No opportunity to probe for more detail on open-ended questions.
- Allows limited exploration of attitudes and views.
- May not be appropriate for certain groups.
- May get low response rate. (Steps can be taken to minimise this which are discussed later).

When you have decided that a survey is the best method to use. There are number key steps to consider *i.e. identifying your objectives, designing your survey, carrying out your survey, analysing your findings and presenting your results*. The rest of the document will work through these key considerations.

**Step 1: Identifying your objectives**

The first part of the planning process is to identify the objectives of your survey or what you want to find out. A survey can be a useful tool in helping to identify how your organisation is performing in terms of volunteer management and what impact being involved in your organisation is having on volunteers.

**Step 2: Designing your survey**
An example survey has been attached to this document but it is important that you use this as guideline only and adapt it to suit the needs/ focus of your organisation.

Key things to consider when designing a survey:

- Keep it as short as possible, it should take no longer than 10-15 min to complete.
- Use plain, simple language and avoid jargon.
- Use a mixture of open and closed questions.
- Use clear headings and numbers to structure your survey.
- Make sure to use an easy to read font such as Arial and at least font size 12.

Once you have designed your survey you should consider carrying out a pilot with a small number of people. Piloting the survey will help to make sure that the questions make sense and highlight any ambiguity in the meaning of the words or phrases. Try not to use respondents that would form part of the actual sample, as these people are for the real run!

**Step 3: Carrying out your survey**

Consider who you want to include in the survey and decide how it will be given out i.e. postal, electronic or telephone. In order to be inclusive you should think about the most appropriate completion method. You may need to provide multiple methods. It is important also to offer one to one support for those who may have difficulty completing the questions by themselves for example those with literacy problems or visual impairment. If sending postal surveys, where possible, try and include a self addressed, free post envelope.

- Ensure you have an up-to-date list of emails and/or postal addresses for respondents. Keep a record of how many people you have approached to take part, this will help you to calculate your overall response rate.
- Decide who you are going to include in the research, if you are not including everyone (all of your volunteers) you will have to create a sample. This means deciding who you are going to involve, for example you can choose to cover a particular time period -, all those who have been actively volunteering since April last year. Try to get a spread across roles, length of experience, age and gender so that results are more representative of your volunteer base.
- It is important that you keep your sampling technique consistent and open; not just picking those who you would prefer to include or only including people you think will be more likely to respond.
- Decide how long you have to carry out the work and set a time frame for the design, distribution and analysis of results.
• Ensure that you have a safe place to securely store completed surveys, which can only be accessed by those working on the data; a locked filing or storage cabinet is ideal.

Ideas of how to maximise response rates

• Add a cover letter providing a clear explanation of the survey objectives and how the information will be used and stored by your organisation. Offer to give feedback on the results of the survey to all those who participate so they can see the outcome of their contribution.

• Give clear instructions on how to return and complete the survey and provide a deadline for response i.e. 2 weeks.

• Ensure you provide contact details of a nominated person who can answer any questions or queries.

• Keeping surveys anonymous can be beneficial as people may be more open and honest with their feedback and comments.

• Offer a free post self addressed envelope.

• Follow up on postal surveys with a telephone call or a 2\textsuperscript{nd} copy of the survey.

Step 4: Analysing your findings

Analysing findings simply means looking at the information you have gathered (data) and drawing conclusions (what you have found out). This can involve creating graphs, charts and percentages. Depending on the number of responses to your surveys you can use different methods of analysis;

• If using a small number of respondents i.e. no more than 15, you could use paper to collate results. If you have between 15-30 people, it is easy to input information into a spreadsheet.

• For a large number of surveys you should consider using the online survey tool Survey Monkey. It acts as a data collection and analytical tool. It allows people to complete surveys online and you can also manually enter surveys from postal returns; it creates charts which you can input into word to produce reports. To find out more go to \url{http://www.surveymonkey.com/}. Volunteer Now has a subscription to the site, the username and password is available from the Policy and Information Team.
• When looking at your findings you can draw conclusions and recommendations from the data. This may include things that volunteers think your organisation is doing well or areas for future improvement. You can also use the data to describe what volunteers have gained from being involved, how satisfied they feel and the benefits of volunteering with your organisation.

Step 5: Presenting your results

Once your survey has been completed and you have analysed your results it is important to present and publicise the findings. This can be done in a number of ways:

• A summary sheet highlighting the main findings.

• A brief report.

• Information session with managers, staff and volunteers explaining the findings and any recommendations.

• A presentation to funders or management board.

• You can use your findings in the future to give support to funding applications and in marketing and publicity material.

Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure information in this publication is accurate. However it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith without accepting liability. If relevant, we therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking any action on the matters covered herein. Charity (Inland Revenue) No. XT22896. Company Limited by Guarantee No. NI602399. Registered in Northern Ireland.
You may find it useful to complete this grid as part of your planning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers /Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Objectives: What do you want your survey to find out?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who do you want to respond?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Volunteers, members of staff, beneficiaries.                               |
| How are you going to distribute your survey?                             |                |
Post, email, through an online survey tool.                                |
| What questions are you going to ask? Are there existing templates / surveys that you could adapt? |                |
| Sampling? You will need an up to date contact list(s), if using survey monkey you will need email addresses. |                |
| Analysis- consider what way you are going to use to make sense of the information you gather i.e. excel, survey monkey, on paper. Consider how will you present the findings? |                |
| Time Frame- consider the time and help you have when thinking about the tools you are going. Factor in piloting the survey i.e. testing the questions out. |                |