

# Support and Supervision of Volunteers

There is no one system for supporting and supervising volunteers in every organisation. A really effective support and supervision system can only be developed over time by testing out what works and what doesn't work for particular volunteers and particular volunteer roles. It should be kept under constant review.

Consider the following information and try to identify the most suitable methods or activities for providing support and supervision to volunteers. For each method or activity, consider:

- What is **the balance** between support and supervision?
- Which **functions** of support and/or supervision could it fulfil?
- Is it **accessible, flexible** and **appropriate**?
- Would it be most effective used one-to-one or in a group, or face-to-face or online?

Decide how you will implement these methods to build a system of support and supervision, considering:

## Who:

- Who will have access to it?
- Who will be responsible for implementing it?
- Who else should be involved in it?
- Will it be supervisor or peer-led?

## When and where:

- Frequency
- Duration
- On demand or scheduled
- Location
- Flexibility
- In person or online

## Resources:

- How much time will it require, including preparation?
- What facilities, equipment or materials might you require?
- What expenses might volunteers need reimbursed in order to access it?
- What accessibility and equity issues do you need to address?
- What information or expertise might you need to access?

## A: Supporting the Person

Support for volunteers can be offered in both formal/structured ways, e.g. induction, training, one-to-one meetings, group support meetings, and informal/unstructured ways, e.g. by listening and communicating with your volunteers on a daily basis. We can distinguish between eight broad types of support that may be offered through these and other activities. These eight types of support are:

1. **Offering advice-** sharing your ideas on what would be the best course of action for them to take, based on your own experience;
2. **Giving information-** providing volunteers with the information they need in a particular situation, e.g. role description, relevant contacts, etc.;
3. **Direct action-** doing something on behalf of the volunteer and relieving pressure;
4. **Training-** helping someone to acquire knowledge and skills;
5. **Changing systems-** working to influence and improve systems which cause difficulty for volunteers. Working on organisational development rather than with individuals;
6. **Personal support-** helping volunteers to explore problems and alternative ways of dealing with them;
7. **Facilitating mutual support-** enabling volunteers to support each other, e.g. group support, buddying, etc.; and
8. **Supervisory support-** giving feedback on volunteer performance.

Each category may amount to a 'strategy' for support for a particular volunteer in a specific work context. A good support system can accommodate any strategy or combination of strategies, and should use a variety of methods and activities for making that support available to volunteers. Consider the following issues in relation to how you provide support:

### **One-to-One VERSUS Group Support**

Group support can be difficult to do well, but it can be a very time-efficient way of providing support to a large number of volunteers. It can increase the uptake of support by providing the incentive of social contact with colleagues, but it may not be a suitable environment to address certain individual needs. It may not be welcomed by some who do not want to mix with other volunteers. A good support system combines both and will also address many of the functions of supervision for volunteers. Some advantages of working in a group include:

- One person does not have to spread themselves so thinly and support is available from a wider range of people.
- Groups lend themselves to more imaginative ways of dealing with skills development and discussion of important issues.
- Giving and receiving feedback can become part of the culture of a group and can enhance self-awareness and learning, as well as improving volunteer effectiveness.
- Groups can enable volunteers to become more active within an organisation, e.g. giving the opportunity to exchange ideas on the way that their own work is organised, or by looking at policy development issues.
- Groups can be social and fun!

### **Manager/Supervisor VERSUS Peers**

Volunteers can be facilitated in supporting each other through support group meetings or a buddy system. This can take some of the burden off their direct supervisor, although you should still monitor the effectiveness of such methods and be available to facilitate meetings when required.

While peer support can tap into creative and varied ways of developing volunteers and dealing with problems, the responsibility for providing support to volunteers still needs to be assigned to someone, i.e. a volunteer manager, if there is one.

## **In Person VERSUS at a distance**

It is not always possible to meet every volunteer face-to-face on a regular basis, e.g. when volunteers work at different locations or different hours from you, but they still need support. In this situation, communication is vital and volunteers should receive regular and timely updates on issues affecting them and the wider organisation.

Telephone contact or online meeting platforms allows direct discussion of the volunteer's situation. Volunteers who are working on their own may feel isolated or unrecognized, so try to get out to see them in their own environment occasionally and consider organising social get-togethers for volunteers and encouraging these volunteers to attend.

## **Scheduled VERSUS on demand**

Many volunteers feel they want to give to the organisation and don't expect to get anything back. They may be reluctant to ask for support even when they face real difficulties. By having regular scheduled support opportunities, volunteers are encouraged to view it as part and parcel of their volunteering structure.

However, difficulties don't always arise just in time for the volunteer's next support meeting, and experienced volunteers may not want to be tied to monthly meetings "whether they need it or not." So, you will also need to find ways of providing support on demand which fit with your own responsibilities and workload.

## **B: Supervising the Activity**

The factors discussed above are also relevant to supervision, but, since supervision is one of the main ways in which you ensure that volunteers are working effectively for the organisation, it is usually appropriate to include some more structured methods in the wider support system for this purpose. With regard to supervision 'strategies', there are three broad approaches:

- 1. Managerial-** Volunteers need to fulfil the roles that have been assigned to them by the organisation and to do this in ways the organisation considers appropriate, e.g. equal opportunities, setting boundaries with clients, etc.  
In supervision, the managerial function is about making sure the volunteer is doing what is expected of them. It may also involve exploring how they are balancing the sometimes-conflicting expectations placed on them by the organisation and its clients, as well as their own standards and values.
- 2. Educative-** This focuses on the development of the individual volunteer in their voluntary work. An important aspect of this will be giving feedback to enable people to reflect on particular situations in order to learn from them, identify strengths and weaknesses, and explore areas for development and training. This process will mainly focus on enabling the volunteer to draw insights from their experience, but may also include sharing of information by the supervisor in order to develop someone's understanding or knowledge.

- 3. Supportive-** This is concerned with creating a safe space in which volunteers can talk about their feelings about their volunteering and any problems or issues around it. It may also involve enabling someone to explore and deal with feelings in their personal life, which are affecting their volunteering. The aim will not necessarily be to resolve these problems, but to identify ways of getting appropriate support. The other key aspect of the supportive function is giving recognition and encouragement, which helps a volunteer to feel valued and empowered.

It is important to remember that supervision is not the same as support, or having a friendly chat, nor is it 'checking up'. ***Supervision is making sure that the needs and interests of the individual are being balanced with the needs and interests of the organisation.***

Where they aren't, as their manager, you must take action to sort it out.

For this reason among others, most managers find one-to-one meetings essential in fulfilling the supervisory functions. Obviously, this can be time-consuming and so, if you have responsibility for a large number of volunteers in sensitive or demanding roles, it may be appropriate to delegate this duty to other people, i.e. if there are other people involved in supervising volunteers.

It is also a good idea to make time to meet directly with every volunteer on a one-to-one basis at some stage during the year. For certain volunteer roles with limited responsibility, this may even suffice. Both types of meeting need to focus on the following **seven key supervision tasks**:

1. Establishing good working relationships among volunteers and with paid workers, if there are any.
2. Encouraging attitudes that motivate people towards improving their performance.
3. Interpreting and applying the organisation's policies, systems and standards.
4. Assisting volunteers to work safely and within their abilities.
5. Dealing with any problems regarding the volunteer's performance.
6. Initiating or recommending volunteers for new tasks or training.
7. Planning and maintaining work schedules.

### **Questions for Supervision Meetings**

The following questions help to ensure you cover all of these tasks. They are covered under some general headings. You may not cover them in this order, or you may not need to ask them all as you may feel they are not relevant.

#### **GENERALLY:**

How do you feel about your volunteering generally?

- 1. WHAT IS GOING WELL?** Is there anything you've done which you are pleased about, or you have particularly enjoyed?

**2. WHAT HAS NOT BEEN GOING SO WELL?**

Is there anything that has happened which you are unsure about? Are there particular situations that you would like to talk through?

**3. WORKLOAD:**

How are you finding the workload?- too much, too little, too easy, too demanding? Is volunteering fitting in with the other commitments you have in your life?

**4. ACTIONS AGREED LAST SESSION:**

Last meeting, we agreed to do \_\_\_\_\_, let's chat about the progress with this.

**5. RELATIONSHIPS:**

How are you getting on with the rest of the team- staff, volunteers, service users?

**6. IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT:**

Discuss and record any suggestions the volunteer may have given on how to improve the project.

Explore if there are any aspects of their volunteering that they (or you) feel they could improve on.

Any concerns you have with the volunteer, e.g. performance, should be raised during the session.

Serious concerns may invoke the formal part of a 'Complaints and Dealing with Concerns' policy, requiring a specific meeting.

**7. PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT:**

Explore if any issues/concerns/problems discussed could be addressed with additional information or training. Agree what these would be and the processes for achieving them.

**8. DEVELOPMENTS TO ROLE:**

Are you happy with your present volunteer role?

Are there any special projects or new areas of work you would like to explore? This could be dependent on staff capacity or funds.

The volunteer may want to end the relationship and try a new role.

**9. NEW ACTIONS:**

Are there any actions that we should set ourselves between now and next time we meet?

Is there any particular issue that you would like me to bring to the team or management?

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