

RESOURCE GUIDE 5

QUALITY AREA 5: SUPPORTING VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers feel supported at all times, that they are a part of the organisation and that their contribution makes a difference.

This Resource Guide will explore good practice in relation to supporting volunteers and making sure that systems are in place to involve them effectively thereby maximising their contribution. It will explore the following standards:

5.1 Volunteers feel appropriately supported in their role and able to discuss all aspects of their volunteering

5.1.1 Supporting Volunteers

5.1.2 Providing supervision of volunteers' activity

5.2 Volunteers and everyone in the organisation who comes into contact with volunteers are clear about the scope of volunteer roles and what volunteers can expect from the organisation

5.2.1 Code of Practice/Guidelines

5.2.2 Volunteer Agreements

5.3 Volunteers have the opportunity to discuss how they are doing

5.4 Volunteers have opportunities to express their views and ideas and to be involved in relevant decision making

5.5 Volunteers feel there is good communication between themselves and the organisation

5.6 There are systems for volunteers to have a positive and managed exit

5.1 Volunteers feel appropriately supported in their role and able to discuss all aspects of their volunteering

Having spent the time and effort planning how to recruit the right volunteers and find them the right role, it is really important that you now try to keep the volunteer volunteering for you! Providing support and supervision are key tools in balancing the needs of the organisations with those of the volunteer, to achieve a productive and fulfilling volunteering experience. As with everything, the degree of formality will be determined by the nature of the role, the needs of the volunteer, the number of volunteering hours and the complexity of your organisation and what it does.

The words 'support' and 'supervision' are often used almost interchangeably, and in practice, they are frequently delivered through the same activities or methods. However, they do in fact fulfil very distinct functions, and it is important to distinguish between them in order to achieve the balance mentioned above. It may be useful to think of support and supervision as a continuum with the needs of the volunteer at one end, and the demands of the role at the other:



Think about how you could develop a systematic (and this doesn't always mean formal) approach to volunteer support and supervision, combining a variety of activities and options which are suitable to the needs of your particular organisation and volunteers. The following **four key principles** are also important:

1. **Climate-** It is vital that you foster a climate where volunteers know that they can ask for help. A point of contact for support should always be available and equally, supervision must be seen as a part of the volunteering experience and not something that only happens when there is a problem.
2. **Accessibility-** Support and supervision must be provided at appropriate times and places for volunteers. Sometimes, this means taking support to volunteers and offering it on their terms, even though this may mean making further demands on the resources of the organisation.
3. **Flexibility-** This is the ability to accommodate the needs of individual volunteers by offering a range of options, even tailoring them, to the volunteer. You need to take onboard for example, the culture and language needs of different groups and provide support or supervision according to those, and other special needs.
4. **Appropriateness-** The support given must bear some relationship to the work volunteers are being asked to do, as well as being obviously helpful to them. A balance should be maintained between the primary needs of the organisation for the completion of tasks and delivery of services (supervision) on the one hand, and on the other, the personal needs of the volunteer (support). Volunteering is not therapy, although much of the activity may be therapeutic for the volunteer.

5.1.1 Supporting Volunteers

Support has been defined as *“the interest, understanding and care which is provided for volunteers, which keeps them going all the time and additionally in times of crisis and enables them to satisfy their needs and those of the organisation.”*

The **functions of support** activities are to:

- Focus on the person;
- Set up an environment where volunteers can express themselves;
- Combat isolation which sometimes accompanies some volunteer roles;
- Help resolve problems, usually of a personal nature;
- Help a volunteer feel good about what they are doing and show that they are valued.

For ideas on ways to provide effective support to volunteers, see [Support and Supervision of Volunteers](#) (Section A).

5.1.2 Providing supervision of volunteers' activity

Supervision is described as *“a way of monitoring a volunteer's performance to help them benefit from their involvement, to make sure they are carrying out tasks appropriately, encourage problem-solving and provide guidance.”* Regardless of whether a volunteer is helping out at a Parkrun or befriending a very vulnerable young person, there needs to be some degree of supervision, keeping in mind the 4 principles in 5.1.

The main **functions of supervision** are:

- Monitoring and evaluating work and work performance;
- Clarifying priorities;
- Identifying training needs;
- Providing an opportunity to discuss the volunteering task and responsibilities;
- Providing a framework for agreement on change;
- Improving confidence and competence in carrying out the role;
- Sharing perceptions on how the work is progressing
- Recognising and dealing with problems

For ideas on ways to provide effective supervision to volunteers, see [Support and Supervision of Volunteers](#) (Section B).

5.2 Volunteers and everyone in the organisation who comes into contact with volunteers are clear about the scope of volunteer roles and what volunteers can expect from the organisation

It is paramount that everyone, including the volunteers themselves know what they are doing, the scope, boundaries and expectations of their roles. This is particularly important in organisations that have paid staff working alongside volunteers- see [Resource Guide 1](#) (section 1.1.2) and [Resource Guide 2](#) (section 2.4.3). As part of the overall ethos of the organisation, everyone needs to know that volunteers should not be asked to do things outside the boundaries of their roles.

There are some key tools that will help you make things clear and indeed the volunteer policy will be an important framework to set out the organisation's position- see [Resource Guide 2](#) (section 2.1.1). Again, it depends on the nature of the role as to how many of these you will want to put in place, but it is definitely worth thinking about having a range of issues written down and addressed in the following places:

- ✓ **Role Description-** [Resource Guide 1](#) (section 1.1.2) ; and [Developing Volunteer Roles](#)
- ✓ **Induction Pack-** [Resource Guide 4](#) (section 4.4); and [Volunteer Induction Checklist](#)
- ✓ **Training Sessions-** [Resource Guide 4](#) (section 4.4); and [Volunteer Training](#)
- ✓ **Code of Practice/Guidelines-** [section 5.2.1](#)
- ✓ **Volunteer Agreement-** [section 5.2.2](#)

5.2.1 Code of Practice/Guidelines

A code of practice is a set of guidelines that lay out how you expect volunteers involved with your organisation to behave- basically the 'dos and don'ts' for volunteers. Along with the volunteer role description, it makes clear each volunteer's role and defines the limits of their work and responsibilities. The code of practice should also make clear the consequences of contravening the standards set. Putting these standards in writing makes them explicit and gives them weight, so that everyone is aware of what is and is not acceptable.

While it might at first appear very formal or inflexible, it is important to understand that having guidelines is as much for the benefit of the volunteer as the organisation. Most volunteers will be more than happy to use such guidance, if it is presented to them properly. It is therefore vital to provide an opportunity to discuss the code of practice fully with new volunteers, presenting it perhaps in a volunteer handbook, taking time to introduce and explain it at induction- see [Induction and Handbook for volunteering](#).

The actual content of a code of practice will reflect particular organisational activities, client group and culture, and therefore will be unique to each organisation. Much of it is likely to focus on the relationships of volunteers with each other, with staff (if there are any), and particularly with clients. For instance, it may be deemed unacceptable for volunteers to accept gifts from service-users, or it may be expected that all personal information about clients is kept confidential. This may also be where standards for the work are specified, e.g. the importance or punctuality and reliability.

Often the issues to be addressed in a code of practice will have been created due to incidents or problems that have arisen in the past. Indeed, such guidelines will need to be reviewed and updated continuously in the light of changing circumstances and experience.

5.2.2 Volunteer Agreements

Another way of making sure that every volunteer is aware of and understands the plethora of arrangements which pertain to their particular volunteer role is to have a volunteer agreement. A volunteer agreement is simply written confirmation of the understanding between the volunteer and the organisation, on which the volunteering is based.

You may be reluctant to put anything in writing for fear of implying a formal employer-employee contract. However, employment contracts, in law, do not depend on the existence of a written agreement. Rather, it is the nature of the relationship, which imposes binding obligations on each party and is based on remuneration, that defines an employee. Volunteer-involving organisations that are honest and open about the nature of the voluntary relationship and pay out-of-pocket expenses to volunteers should have nothing to fear- see [Volunteers and the Law Information Sheet](#). It is common to make a statement to this effect in the agreement itself for instance; ***“This agreement sets out expectations and intentions, not obligations, and is binding in honour only.”***

You may also be concerned that a written agreement is too formal and may intimidate new volunteers. It is important to explain the purpose of the agreement in clarifying mutual expectations; however, it can also be a matter of how you present the agreement. So for example, the relevant information could be laid out in a **‘welcome letter’** instead of as a formal agreement, if that is deemed more suitable for your volunteers. **It is also wise to avoid the use of jargon, or employment-related terms in this and in all volunteering documentation.** Keep it as simple as possible and make sure to clarify all these points during induction. A copy of the agreement/welcome letter should be kept in the volunteer’s individual file with the date it was discussed, and a copy given to the volunteer for their own records. If it was discussed as part of the induction, tick it off the induction checklist.

It can be useful to refer back to an agreement if there are difficulties or queries in the future. It should be clear that both parties can end the volunteering relationship at any time, and there are no obligations in the arrangement. An example of a volunteer agreement in letter form can be found here- see [Developing a Volunteer Agreement](#).

5.3 Volunteers have the opportunity to discuss how they are doing

It will be mutually beneficial to both the volunteer and the organisation if there are opportunities provided to let the volunteer talk about their role. Creating a climate and culture that allows for interaction and conversations about the activity means that volunteers can get help when they need it, or the role can even be reviewed, and things changed to better suit the volunteer.

It is helpful for the volunteer to be allowed to reflect and to receive feedback from others within the organisation including, where relevant, service users. This can often include the opportunity to share information about impact- [Resource Guide 1](#) (section 1.3).

In some organisations or for some roles, there may be formal one-to-one reviews, but supervision meetings and informal chats will also serve the same purpose.

5.4 Volunteers have opportunities to express their views and ideas and to be involved in relevant decision making

A good organisation will listen to its volunteers. To do this they must provide the opportunities for volunteers to express their views or share their ideas. This can be done through surveys, website polls, volunteer forums, workshops and especially through support and supervision. Remember your reasons for involving volunteers in the first place could have been about bringing the community in to your organisation or strengthening the diversity of your team – so make sure you make best use of their diverse range of ideas!- [An Introduction](#) (section A4).

It is also good practice if organisations give some thought to how they could involve a diverse range of volunteers in decision making. How volunteers are involved in decision making, which decisions they are involved in making, and how feedback is sought will depend on the size and nature of the organisation. As a minimum, this should include decisions that directly affect volunteers. Therefore, volunteers should be consulted about the development of relevant policies and procedures and volunteer roles. There should be communication to volunteers about the results of their feedback or involvement in decision making, including changes to policy and practice.

Involving volunteers in decision making does not have to be a formal process, particularly for smaller organisations for whom involvement may be more in determining day-to-day activities. However, it is good practice if organisations can show how they have listened to volunteers, considered their input, and considered what they will do in response.

5.5 Volunteers feel there is good communication between themselves and the organisation

Organisations should explore a range of ways to ensure effective communication between themselves and their volunteers. Two-way communication should be appropriate to ensure that volunteers feel connected to and a part of the organisation, as well as having practical information to undertake their roles. This may be undertaken through day-to-day contact and/or through email, online, text, telephone, notice boards, intranet, meetings and one-to-one discussions as appropriate for the organisation and the role. Consideration should be given to how to communicate with volunteers who are not able to engage online, and arrangements made to provide, e.g. hardcopy newsletters/updates.

Larger organisations may need to consider how communication takes place between the organisation and volunteers at different levels, for example the location or team they are working with, but also the organisation centrally, as sometimes volunteers can feel disconnected from the management and board. In smaller organisations where communication is very informal and probably verbal, make sure that no one is excluded because of language issues or just not being around to hear what is being said.

5.6 There are systems for volunteers to have a positive and managed exit

There are many reasons why a volunteer may need to stop volunteering. However, regardless of the reason, it is an opportunity to get some feedback from the volunteer and maybe even review some of your practices as a result. Be sure to have a process in mind when a volunteer is considering leaving or has decided to leave.

Where possible, speaking to the volunteer in person is recommended and gives you the opportunity to thank them for what they have done. Where this isn't feasible, a questionnaire could be sent out, such as the [Volunteer Exit Questionnaire Template](#).

The questions in this template could also be used in face to face or telephone conversations.

It is important to analyse the information you receive when volunteers leave. Sometimes when a volunteer is leaving, they will give the most honest feedback!