

Volunteer Policies



A volunteer policy defines the role of volunteering within your museum, and how volunteering contributes to your organisational vision and goals.

It also sets out how volunteers can expect to be treated. So the volunteer policy provides a framework for a volunteer programme, and the more detailed policies and procedures that support it.

The purpose of a volunteer policy is to give an overall cohesion to all the various policies and procedures that affect volunteers - recruitment, expenses, health and safety and so on.

A volunteer policy demonstrates an organisation's commitment to its volunteer programme and its individual volunteers. By having such a document in place you are indicating that care and thought have gone into the volunteer programme.

It also helps to ensure consistency. Dealing with volunteers means dealing with a diverse range of people. Being able to refer to a written policy ensures that decisions do not have to be made on an ad hoc basis, and that all volunteers are treated equally and fairly.

A policy allows volunteers to know where they stand; it offers some security, in that they know how they can expect to be treated, and where they can turn to if they feel that things are going wrong.

It also helps ensure that paid staff, senior management and trustees fully understand why volunteers are involved, and what role they have within the organisation.

In summary, a volunteer policy is a document that sets out the overall principles that will govern how the volunteer programme is run. It acts as a central hub from which other more detailed policies and procedures spring, for example, equal opportunities or health and safety.

Developing your volunteer policy

To ensure that volunteering is embedded in the organisation, the senior management (and Trustee Board if you have one) need to understand the role of volunteering and take ownership of the volunteer policy. It is their job to define clearly how volunteering contributes to organisational vision and goals. They need to answer the question, “Why do we involve volunteers?” There may be several answers to this question e.g. to make our collections more accessible to the public through increased opening hours, to enable us to provide more engaging experiences for visitors, to involve a diverse range of people from our community, to enthuse young people about their town’s heritage through work with schools etc.

The most important aspect of policy development is that senior management discuss it and come to clear conclusions. This is the starting point for developing a policy. And it is also senior management’s responsibility to define the principles underpinning the policy e.g. that it is a 2-way relationship whereby the museum gains XXX and the volunteer might gain XXX, that volunteers’ input complements but does not substitute for the work of paid staff.

In some museums, senior staff and trustees will be very engaged in the policy development. However, in others, it may be more difficult for a volunteer co-ordinator to achieve this senior level engagement.

If you have a trustee board, it is worth cultivating a ‘volunteer champion’. This should be somebody who you feel is committed to volunteering and also has some influence over other members of the board. If you work for a local authority, you will probably need to influence through your own line manager. The key thing is to equip the identified person with an understanding of the business case for volunteering - what volunteering can deliver and what it costs, as well as the risks of a poorly managed or resourced programme. A volunteer champion is the person who routinely ensures that management considers any assumptions or implications for the volunteer programme when it debates new proposals and plans.

Once the senior management have set the direction of the policy, it helps if you can engage volunteers and staff in developing the rest of the content. For example, you might set up a working party, consult volunteers about what they get from their volunteering, or ask for feedback on drafts.

Guide to volunteer policy sections

Below is a checklist of the sections you will need in the policy document itself:

1. **Why you involve volunteers** - the organisation's mission, what it does and how volunteers contribute to achievement of the mission
2. **Principles of volunteer involvement** - e.g. 2-way relationship (what the organisation gains and what volunteers gain), volunteers do not replace paid staff, commitment to promoting diversity, equal opportunities (cross-reference to organisational policy), volunteers are bound by confidentiality
3. **Recruitment** - summary of your process i.e. fair and consistent, including references and official checks (not a detailed description)
4. **Induction and training** - e.g. all volunteers receive (are expected to undertake) initial and on-going training to equip them for their roles, summary of how volunteers are inducted and trained, length of initial training / induction depending on role
5. **Expenses** - what out-of-pocket expenses you pay e.g. receipted and up to a maximum of ... per day (but not the details of how you pay them)
6. **Support and direction** - summary of the arrangements, including a named person, annual review
7. **Health and safety** - basic information, including insurance (cross-reference to organisational policy)
8. **Problem-solving** - what to do when something goes wrong e.g. the volunteer isn't happy or there are problems with the way they are carrying out their tasks
9. **Recognition and appreciation** - how the organisation shows it values its volunteers e.g. learning and development opportunities offered, social events, awards, consultation

You need to strike a balance between providing sufficient information and overwhelming the reader with unnecessary detail. Think about the different audiences, including staff, volunteers, trustees and funders. This is a policy statement, not a detailed practical guide. You can also cross-reference to organisation-wide policies such as Health and Safety, but you need to ensure that volunteers are included appropriately in these policies.

All the practical details can be included elsewhere e.g. in the Volunteer Handbook. This is a document that is written for the volunteers themselves, and provides all the details they need to carry out their volunteering.