



4.0 Volunteers

Keeping Volunteers Safe

Overview

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This information sheet outlines the steps your organisation can take to keep volunteers safe, including information on how to carry out a risk assessment.

Introduction

Assessing and managing risk is a vital part of the day to day 'duty of care' to volunteers.

No activity is risk-free, but with forward planning and anticipation of what might go wrong, significant risks can be minimised, and the impact of harmful incidents reduced.



Image: Group of people having a discussion

Plan, Do, Check, Act

The Health and Safety Executive's **Plan, Do, Check, Act** approach to managing safety achieves an integrated and robust approach rather than an isolated, one-off piece of work.



External Link

For Further information review:
[Health and Safety Executive's Plan, Do, Check, Act](#)

Plan

- Think about where you are now in terms of your volunteering activity and where you need to be
- Remember to plan for changes and identify any specific legal requirements that may apply to your organisation

Do

- **Identify your risk profile:**
 - Assess the risks, identify what could cause harm in the workplace, who it could harm and how, and what you will do to manage the risks.
 - Decide what the priorities are and identify the biggest risks.
- **Organise your activities to deliver your plans:**

In particular, aim to:

 - Involve and communicate with the volunteers, so that everyone is clear on what is needed and can discuss issues - develop positive attitudes and behaviours.
 - Provide adequate resources and informed advice where needed.
- **Implement your plan:**
 - Decide on the preventive and protective measures needed and put them in place.
 - Provide the right tools and equipment to carry out the volunteering activity.
 - Train and instruct, to ensure everyone is competent to carry out their role safely.
 - Provide supervision to the volunteer to ensure that arrangements to reduce risks are followed.

Check

- **Measure your performance:**
 - Make sure that your plans have been implemented, 'paperwork' on its own is not a good performance measure.
 - Assess how well the risks are being controlled and if you are achieving your aims. In some circumstances formal audits may be useful.
- **Investigate the causes of accidents, incidents or near misses**

Act

- **Review your performance:**
 - Learn from accidents and incidents, ill-health data, errors and relevant experience, including from other organisations.
 - Revisit plans, policy documents and risk assessments to see if they need updating.
- **Take action on lessons learned, including from audit and inspection reports**

The Different Types of Risks Associated With Volunteers

Potential Risks to Volunteers

- Some volunteering activities are inherently risky, such as emergency rescue, or sporting activities
- The environment in which volunteering takes place may be unsafe
- Volunteers may lack the necessary information, training and instruction to carry out activities or to use equipment in a safe way
- There may be inadequate clarity about the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that a volunteer operates beyond the safe level of their training or competence
- Volunteers' personal data may not be kept confidential
- Lone volunteering may lead to stress

Potential Risks to the Organisation

- Reputation may be damaged if volunteers misrepresent the organisation or speak or act inappropriately
- Breaches of confidentiality
- Theft, fraud or the misuse of resources
- Risk of litigation or civil claim following avoidable incidents
- Reduced capacity to carry out organisational tasks due to injury or illnesses following incident

Potential Risks to Clients or Beneficiaries

- Abuse of clients or beneficiaries by a volunteer
- Provision of inaccurate information or advice
- Inadequate standards of care, service or behaviour

Potential Risk of Harm to Colleagues

- Stepping outside the boundaries/exceeding the authority of a volunteer role.
- Substandard performance by a volunteer which requires others to 'pick up the pieces'.
- Discriminatory behaviour or harassment.

The use of appropriate guidelines and training on safe practices, ongoing monitoring or supervision, and the use of safe equipment are all measures that can be taken to reduce the likelihood of problems arising.

Alternatively, you may consider adapting a volunteer activity, or even stopping it altogether if the risk is judged to be unacceptable.

Carrying out a Risk Assessment

The process of risk assessment helps to identify significant risks and provides a framework for identifying steps that can be taken to reduce these. Risk assessment is not about eliminating all risks, it's about making sure you know about the main risks and the things you need to do to manage them responsibly.

It's not about creating huge amounts of paperwork, either, but rather about identifying sensible measures to control the risks in your organisation. When managing risk, a '**reasonably practicable**' approach is called for. This means balancing the level of risk against the measures needed to control the real risk in terms of money, time or trouble. The aim is not to impose unrealistic or excessive regulations or restrictions on volunteers or to create an onerous burden on the organisation.

It's also worth noting that if you have fewer than five employees, you don't have to write up a risk assessment. If you have five or more employees, you are required by law to write up a risk assessment.

After carrying out a risk assessment, it's important to review regularly. The controls put in place to manage risk should reflect the need for monitoring to ensure they are being followed and remain effective going forward.

Risk Assessment Involves 6 Clear Steps

1. Identify the hazards.
2. Decide who might be harmed and how.
3. Evaluate (score) the risks and decide on precautions needed.
4. Record your significant findings.
5. Review your assessment and update if necessary.
6. Learning from incidents is a key factor in effective risk management.



External Link

A template for carrying out a risk assessment can be downloaded and adapted for your own purposes here:

[Risk Assessment Template](#)

What to Risk Assess?

Organisation – Wider Risks

As an organisation, you may have specific policies which address issues such as social media and internet use, lone working, confidentiality, safeguarding, health and safety, data protection. All of these involve to some extent, identifying risk and appropriate management procedures. But these alone are not enough.

Assessing Activities and Environments

A template such as the one above can be used to risk assess an event or activity – focussing on the activity and the environment in which it will take place. This may be a one-off event or outing, or a regular activity.

For regular events, it can be helpful to produce from your initial risk assessment a 'check list' of what the event organiser need to do to ensure that the event runs safely and smoothly.

Assessing the Volunteer Role

A volunteer role should be written down, for the sake of clarification. It can then be used as a basis for assessing associated risk. This will often, for example, help to inform priorities for induction and training. It will often help to identify the scope of the role including some appropriate boundaries (i.e. **the limits beyond which risks become unacceptable**). Agreed boundaries of a volunteer role need to be clearly communicated to volunteers and, if necessary, to clients and staff.

Many of the identified risks may be addressed by existing organisational policies. However, to be effective, these too must be communicated to volunteers as appropriate. The volunteer role description is a valuable tool in recruitment. If particular experience or qualities are necessary, it should say so. Recruiting volunteers who are well suited to the role can be an important element of risk management. This is especially true in cases where the volunteer role carries high level of risk (e.g. **physical exertion**) or responsibility (e.g. **involvement with vulnerable clients**)



External Link

A volunteer role should be written down for clarity, a template can be downloaded:
[Volunteer Description Template](#)

Assessing Individuals

In some cases, a risk assessment which focuses on individuals will be necessary. Risk assessment will be routinely performed on clients prior to volunteers making home visits, for example. Relevant information then needs to be communicated to the volunteer.

In the case of a volunteer with special needs, a risk assessment of their capabilities in relation to the activities they will undertake or environments in which they will operate will help to identify any support or adaptations that are required. This is an important demonstration of commitment to equal opportunities. Take a look at the appendix for further detail.

Health and Safety at Work Act 1974

There are responsibilities laid upon the employer towards people who are not employees, who may be affected by the employer's activities - such as volunteers, and members of the public:

'...to conduct his undertaking in such a way as to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that persons not in his employment who may be affected thereby are not thereby exposed to risks to their health and safety'

'...to give persons (not being his employees) who may be affected by the way in which he conducts his undertaking the prescribed information about such aspects of the way in which he conducts his undertaking as might affect their health or safety'



External Link

You can read the Health and Safety at Work Act in full on the government legislation website
[Health and Safety at Work Act 1974](#)

Further Information

Plan, Do, Check, Act

Health and Safety Executive

www.hse.gov.uk/managing/plan-do-check-act.htm

Health and Safety made simple

Health and Safety Executive

www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety/index.htm

Investing in Volunteers - Standard

Investing in Volunteers

<https://iiv.investinginvolunteers.org.uk/download-the-standard>

Additional Information Sheets

Third Sector Support Wales

4.8.1 Risk Assessment - Volunteers Based at Home

Appendix 1

Some Questions to Consider in the Course of Risk Identification

The Volunteer:

- Is there any essential requirement when selecting volunteers for this role – or anything that would preclude placing a volunteer?
- Does the volunteer have special needs or requirements?

The Nature of the Role:

- Is there risk of violence or abuse?
- Is confidentiality an issue?
- Is there a risk of physical harm or injury e.g. lifting, eye strain (from extensive use of VDU screen), repetitive strain injury?
- Is the volunteering role likely to be emotionally demanding?
- Is the volunteering activity likely to use hazardous substances?
- Is the volunteer to be linked with vulnerable persons or young people etc?
- Is the volunteer carrying out their role alone i.e. “lone working”?

The Environment:

- Is the volunteering environment suitable for the task (e.g. workstation, safe storage, privacy)?

Equipment:

- Is equipment appropriate, safe, and suitable for the task and have volunteers been trained to use it?
- Is protective/safety equipment needed?

Other:

- Will there be costs incurred, can they be reimbursed?
- Are there significant limits or boundaries to what is expected in this volunteer role?

Some Possible Actions to Control or Minimise Risk:

- Providing safety information
- Ensuring back up support/supervision
- Providing/checking equipment
- Meeting expenses
- Agreeing record keeping/reporting requirements
- Agreeing/reinforcing some ‘ground rules’
- Training and induction
- Amending the role description
- Develop/amend organisational policies
- Emergency procedures



Cefnogi Trydydd
Sector **Cymru**

Third Sector
Support **Wales**

Third Sector Support Wales is a network of support organisations for the whole of the third sector in Wales.

It consists of the 19 local and regional support bodies across Wales, the County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) and the national support body, Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA).

For further information contact
<https://thirdsectorsupport.wales/contact/>

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.