

Building a culture of volunteering: A toolkit

Collated by Mind in Gwent in partnership with WCVA

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Building an Embedded culture of volunteering

This self-assessment toolkit for building a culture of volunteering is the product of many ‘community of practice’ meetings involving professionals working with volunteers in the Gwent area and beyond, as well as consultation and collaboration with young people across Gwent and our own youth volunteer cohort. The suggestions we make in this document are not meant to be an exhaustive checklist of how to implement volunteering, but a collection of common ideas and values used across organisations that have been considered best practice when working with volunteers.

During the creation of this self-assessment toolkit, the concept of culture was a recurring theme in our discussions with professionals and young people. The concept of volunteering being embedded in the organisation in which it takes place seemed to be central to our ideas on how best to work with volunteers. Initially, we included this as a key consideration of the self assessment tool, however we soon realised that rather than being a key consideration, building this culture of volunteering was the ideal that we were all working towards.

You may find that some suggestions in this document cover many principles of volunteering. The wonderful thing about working to find ways to ensure your volunteers have a positive experience of volunteering in your organisation is that there will often be unexpected benefits. This means that by implementing just a few ideas from this toolkit, you could see many more improvements in the experience of your volunteers than just the ones you set out to achieve.

Building an Embedded culture of volunteering

Our self-assessment toolkit is separated into sections:

- The Golden Threads.
- Self-Assessment.
- Guidance.

Golden threads - These are the fundamentals that we feel underpin good practice in working with volunteers, and therefore underpin everything else discussed in this toolkit.

Self-Assessment - The self assessment is a model that can be used by organisations and volunteers to evaluate where they are at with volunteering, and what next steps could be taken to move towards an embedded culture of volunteering.

Guidance - This builds upon the statements in the self assessment, giving more information and ideas for implementation.

We believe that a culture of volunteering is good for organisations, good for communities and good for life.

Golden Threads

The golden threads proposed here are a set of attitudes and beliefs that we believe are the fundamental underpinnings of best practice in volunteering. They proved themselves to be commonalities across many of the different areas of volunteering we identified as part of our communities of practice research. Rather than functioning as categories of actionable points like those included in the assessment tool, the golden threads are the essentials needed to allow volunteering to flourish.

Our 4 Golden Threads

Value:

Showing that you value volunteers and the work that they do is important for continued engagement, not just on a personal level but on an organisation level. This can take time to build, however is worth the time and effort, as it fosters so many of the qualities needed for a volunteer to have a positive volunteering experience, such as a sense of belonging and purpose. How this looks can be very different for many organisations – some examples are included in our guidance section.

Golden Threads

Shared ethos:

Often this is the very reason why people want to volunteer with organisations - they have a particular passion for a cause or experience in a certain area and want to share this passion and knowledge with others. It is important that the ethos of the organisation and the ethos of the volunteers are aligned. Although this might seem like a given when volunteers enter your organisation, it can be worth spending some time exploring your volunteers motivations for volunteering and how this might appear in practice for them. This can help you to frame the volunteering activities appropriately, and give insight into what activities are suitable for the volunteers you work with.

Expectations and communication:

Ensuring that volunteers are clear about what is expected of them can be the difference between engagement and disengagement. The first step here is to ensure that the organisation understands what it wants to achieve with volunteers so that this can be communicated as clearly as possible. It's also helpful if all staff are clear on this so that the understanding of the function of volunteers in the organisation is consistent across teams. This also means that people are clear on what they can expect from volunteers, setting them up for success as part of the organisation.

Golden Threads

It is also key that we manage the expectations of the volunteers themselves from the beginning of their experience with the organisation. Be as clear and honest as possible about what activities they will be able to get involved with, and if those things have not been decided yet - let them know this too. It's important to keep in communication with volunteers to let them know of any changes happening with the organisation that might affect them or the work that they do. Building these clear lines of communication from the beginning helps to avoid misunderstandings and the disengagement that can sometimes result from this.

It's important to bear in mind how different people communicate, and set expectations about this too. Some people might be better able to access some forms of communication, so working with your volunteers to find the best mode of communication for them can be helpful. Of course, it is difficult to do the best for everyone when we are all different, but there might be simple accommodations that can be made to better facilitate the process for most people.

We should also try to remember that for lots of people we work with, volunteering is one small part of their busy life, so ensuring we keep the frequency of communication to a manageable level helps with engagement.

Golden Threads

Support:

Volunteers cannot function within an organisation without support. How this looks will be different for every volunteer as well as every organisation, but it's important that volunteers have some support to enable them to engage in the activities offered to them. This might mean exploring options with volunteers, ensuring staff members are equipped to work with volunteers, or giving volunteers a point of contact so that they know who to go to with any support needs.

It is also worth bearing in mind the nature of the volunteering activities you provide when considering what support might be required for volunteers. For example, at Mind we work with people who have experienced mental health problems, and as a result we have lots of volunteers with lived experience of mental health problems. While this is invaluable for the peer support activities we provide, it is important that we provide adequate support for volunteers to ensure that this kind of volunteering is not having an adverse impact on their mental health.

Self-Assessment Tool

The Self-Assessment tool can be used in a few different ways, depending on what you are looking to get from the activity. It can be used to evaluate strengths and development areas of an organisation's volunteer provision, or it can be used with a volunteer to assess their volunteering experience.

Each point on the star represents a key element of the volunteering experience, and each statement within these points represents stages within these elements that can enhance the volunteer's experience in that particular area. Find which statements match the experience of your volunteers. What's left? Maybe these could be some actions for improving the experience of your volunteers.



Guidance

Here you will find an expansion on each statement in the self-assessment, and further ideas for implementation. We recognise that the ideas presented here will not be applicable for every experience of volunteering, but are a collection of the ideas and suggestions made in our communities of practice research which was conducted with volunteers and professionals working with volunteers.

Connection

Communication between staff and volunteers is facilitated:

- You said we did feedback formats – this helps volunteers to see what changes have been implemented and how their feedback matters to the organisation they volunteer for.
- Keeping people in the loop of internal/external events – this ensures that volunteers are able to feel a part of the organisation as they have knowledge of what is happening outside of their specific involvement, and it also gives volunteers opportunities to get involved in things that they previously may not have known about.
- Feedback loops- ensuring that feedback is taken on and listened to and any changes that have been implemented are shared with the volunteer cohort.

A space that is as open and honest as possible:

- Ensuring that volunteers are aware that you may not be able to share all information with them but being committed to sharing what you can with them can really help volunteers to feel part of an organisation, and recognise the value of their voice and the work that they do.

Guidance

Staff are invested in building relationships with volunteers:

- While it's important to maintain appropriate professional boundaries when building relationships with volunteers, forming a connection with the volunteers you are working with is also key for continued engagement. This also helps to ensure that you know your volunteers strengths and areas for development.

Boundaries are flexible within the volunteering space:

- Boundaries are important to have when working with volunteers, and ensuring they are communicated clearly to volunteers is something that many professionals and volunteers expressed throughout our research. However, it was also recognised that there is a need for boundaries to be flexible at times, and that volunteers need to understand this too.

Sense of unity exists between volunteers:

- Our research revealed that feeling part of a team that has a shared goal is a key element of the volunteering experience. This can be facilitated in many different ways, but things highlighted by the professionals and volunteers we spoke to were gestures of appreciation (things such as thank you notes, an event to celebrate volunteer contribution, a social event or even a social media post recognising the contribution) as well as time set aside throughout their volunteering experience to connect with other volunteers.

Guidance

Appreciation

Remunerations/expenses:

- How are you able to financially give back to your volunteers? This includes details such as expenses for travel, refreshments while they are volunteering as well as anything else that might leave them out of pocket. It's important that volunteers know what they will be compensated for during their volunteering experience.

Staff respect all volunteers equally:

- Regardless of how much they can be involved or how long they have been involved. Naturally, the volunteer cohort will develop their own group dynamic, but it is important that staff model as best they can that all volunteer contributions are valued equally.

Guidance

Opportunities for social connection:

- Volunteers involved in our research spoke about the importance of social connection as a mode of showing appreciation. Examples they noted as good practice were themed meet-ups such as 'pizza and puzzle night' or picnics as well as being invited to functions involving the whole workforce, for example a Christmas meal. It's important to think about the wants and needs of your specific volunteer cohort to ensure social connection is what they want, and what this could look like for them.

Meet volunteers' expectations of volunteering:

- All volunteers will have different ideas about what volunteering means for them. Finding out what these expectations are as early on in a volunteer's experience with you can ensure that you are able to give them an experience that meets their needs. Although you may not be able to meet all of the needs of your volunteers, it can help you to understand where you can develop, and help your volunteers feel involved by working with them to implement any changes.

Guidance

Purpose

Appropriate opportunities are presented to volunteers:

- Volunteers and professionals highlighted that volunteers being given frequent opportunities to contribute within the organisation can help to ensure they feel that their contribution is of value.
- It's important to think about whether the tasks you are designating to volunteers are appropriate for them, and whether they are equipped with the skills and knowledge to undertake them. If they are not yet ready to undertake some volunteer activities, could you work with them to develop the skills and knowledge needed?

Meaningful opportunities are presented:

- Ensuring the opportunities that are presented to the volunteers are worthwhile and have a clear purpose.
- It can be advantageous to show your volunteers what has been done in the past to show them what impact volunteering in your organisation can have.
- In our research, factors such as avoiding tokenistic involvement, offering activities that are of interest to volunteers or are seen as important to them, as well as opportunities for active participation were all seen as key elements of meaningful engagement.

Guidance

We understand what people want to get out of volunteering:

- Take time to listen to what each volunteer wants to get from their time volunteering and understand that each person will have different goals. Knowing their interests and goals within volunteering can help to establish who would be best suited to a particular activity, and knowing what volunteers would like to develop can help with planning future activities.
- You could do this by holding space for this during their training, holding focus groups, or meeting with each individual volunteer if possible.
- It's also worth bearing in mind that people's motivations may change as they move through their volunteering experience, and therefore it is worth checking in with your volunteers periodically to understand whether their needs have changed.

Present opportunities that work towards their individual sense of purpose:

- Think about how an opportunity that has arisen is beneficial to the individuals that volunteer with you. This ensures that the activities on offer are cohesive with their motivation for volunteering. Knowing your volunteer cohort can be beneficial in helping them feel part of the organisation and the cause they are choosing to support through volunteering.

Guidance

Flexibility.

Key information is shared with volunteers:

- Ensuring that information about volunteering activities is available for volunteers to access at all times is key for maintaining engagement. This can be beneficial for volunteers who may not be able to attend meetings at all times.
- Is there a way that you can involve volunteers in planning or meetings when they can't be present? For example, sending out the topics for discussion ahead of time for volunteer contribution, sending a brief description of what was decided after the meeting is over, or making use of polls or online chats.

Accommodations are made for volunteers and information provided about possible accommodations:

- Understanding what limitations your volunteers may have and working with them to make sure volunteering is as accessible as possible was seen as a key factor of what makes a volunteering experience work for volunteers.
- Sharing what accommodations are already in place to support volunteers is also something that can enable volunteers to feel comfortable in asking for their needs to be met.

Guidance

Staff demonstrate a willingness to take on board and action volunteer suggestions:

- Taking the time to understand what volunteers want from their experience can really demonstrate the value of their experience in their volunteer role, building their confidence and ensure that the service they contribute to is responsive to this valuable experience.
- Working with volunteers to actually implement changes that they suggest can be rewarding for both the service and the volunteers.

Our minimum commitments are attainable for most:

- Think about whether your expectations of volunteers are something that most people can reasonably meet. Think about the needs of the people that commonly volunteer with you or might volunteer with you; this can include things such as financial costs, time commitments and limitations due to physical and/or mental health.

Guidance

Volunteer led :

Volunteers can work independently when appropriate:

- Ensuring that volunteers are given the time and support to develop the skills needed to complete activities independently. Volunteers involved in the creation of this toolkit identified that being able to work independently where possible was a contributor to increased confidence in volunteering. This can be done through training, mentoring from staff members and other volunteers, as well as observation and supported hands on experience.

Activities are initiated by volunteers:

- Ideas for development of current volunteering activities are able to be initiated by volunteers. Time and space is provided for these ideas to be heard and discussed. There are opportunities for the volunteers to get involved with the implementation of these development ideas.

Guidance

Volunteer voice is heard, listened to and acted upon:

- Choice and agency for volunteers is facilitated. Volunteers know that their voice is included in the development of the work that happens around them. Volunteers are told or can see the impact of sharing their thoughts and feedback around their volunteering activities. This can be done by creating specific spaces where volunteer feedback is the main focus; e.g. focus groups, meetings, a section of a 1-1 meeting with a volunteer or a fun/engagement day. These opportunities can help foster an environment where the voices of volunteers are valued and made part of the day-to-day of the organisation.

Volunteers are a key part of decision making:

- Decision making is viewed as a collaborative process by volunteers and staff members. This can mean ensuring that volunteer feedback and ideas are central to any work involving volunteering as well as involving them where possible in other decisions happening within the organisation. This recognises the value of the volunteer experience as part of the day-to-day functioning of the organisation. This could look like sharing new plans for the development of the organisation where possible, or sharing ideas for new projects to include volunteer perspectives.