



The Old Court House, Floyds Row, St Aldates, Oxford, OX1 1SS
Tel 01865 251946 Fax 01865 204138 E-mail vol@ocva.org.uk www.oxnet.org.uk

Handbooks or Policies?

What is the difference between a volunteer policy and a volunteer handbook, and why should we have them?

A volunteer policy is a framework for a volunteer programme. 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. As such it helps define the role of volunteers within the organisation, and how they can expect to be treated.

There are a number of advantages in having a volunteer policy in place.

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 showing that care and thought have gone into the volunteer programme.

It 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.

If your organisation has not yet started to work with volunteers it is the ideal starting point to consider exactly how you will involve them in your work, as it encompasses everything from recruitment to supervision and dealing with any problems that may arise.

Generally speaking, 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 policies and procedures spring, for example, equal opportunities or health and safety. A volunteer handbook carries information that will be helpful for the volunteer as part of their day to day work for the organisation. Although not as important as a volunteer policy, handbooks can be extremely useful for volunteers.

So while a policy might state that all volunteers are entitled to be reimbursed for their out of pocket expenses, the handbook would inform the volunteer how to go about claiming, which forms to fill out, which finance person they have to see and so on. An important distinction is that volunteer policies are for everyone in the organisation; they are guidelines for the involvement of volunteers in the life and work of the organisation, while handbooks are solely for the volunteers.

The best way to look on a handbook is as a reference guide for the volunteer, a back up to the information they will receive during their induction. Handbooks might tell the volunteer about tea making facilities, practical advice on health and safety, information on the role of the volunteer co-ordinator and how volunteers will be supervised.

The content depends largely on the particular situation of each individual organisation. It makes sense to discuss with current volunteers what information they would like to have to hand, especially in their first few weeks. Induction is one good place to start to look for likely content; the information you give volunteers in their induction meetings is likely to be the sort of thing they should be able to refer to later. Many organisations place their grievance procedures, health and safety policies and so on in the appendices of their handbooks.

Do remember to keep the language in handbooks clear and readable. Some organisations use graphics and cartoons to break up the text and make the document more user friendly.

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