

VOLUNTEER AGREEMENTS

What Is A Volunteer Agreement?

Groups are understandably aware of the dangers of creating a contract with their volunteers and can be reluctant to have any form of written agreement with them. However, as long as the Group avoids any form of obligation or contractual language any risk is outweighed by the benefits of having a written agreement.

Volunteer agreements set out the organisation's commitment to its volunteers, and what it can expect from its volunteers. They act as a reference point for volunteers, and a reminder to the Group that it should meet the standards of good practice that it has set itself.

Volunteers Agreements are written guidelines on mutually agreed undertakings between organisation and volunteer. As with volunteer role descriptions and person specifications, agreements should not be viewed simply as something to have because it "looks good". Neither should they be seen as unnecessary bureaucracy, but rather a straightforward document which demonstrates an organisations commitment to its volunteers. In other word, they are a tool of good management practice. This paper looks at the form a volunteer agreement should take, what to avoid and how it fits in with the overall volunteering management picture.

What Should A Volunteer Agreement Include?

A volunteer agreement might include a role outline, but should include details of the Group's commitment to provide adequate:

- Induction & Training
- Equal Opportunities
- Health & Safety
- Expenses
- Support, Supervision and Feedback
- Insurance

And the volunteers commitment to:

- Work to the best of their ability
- Follow policies and procedures
- Maintain confidentiality
- Make a specific time commitment
- Provide references if required
- Inform you if they are unable to do their voluntary work

A typical agreement might state that the Group will reimburse volunteer expenses, provide adequate training and supervision, carry out adequate risk assessments and treat volunteers in accordance with its equal opportunities policy. Volunteers would agree to follow the rules and procedures of the organisation, and meet time commitments, giving adequate notice if this is not possible.

It is not necessary for volunteers to sign volunteer agreements

Are there things to be avoided?

Care needs to be taken regarding the reasons and intentions for having such agreements, in particular, the way in which they are worded. The exact nature and wording of the document will differ according to the organisation and the type of work a volunteer is undertaking. What is important, however, is the manner in which a Volunteer Agreement is worded.

First and foremost a Volunteer Agreement should not be viewed as a contract of employment. If it is intended to "contract" a volunteer to carry out a specific job then that person's status may change from volunteer to employee. This, in turn, can give them full employment rights. It is good practice to regard volunteers as equal to paid employees in terms of equal opportunities, for example. However, having a volunteer making a claim for say unfair dismissal on the grounds of race or sex, could be, potentially, ruinous for an organisation.

Secondly, a degree of care needs to be taken over the wording of a volunteer Agreement. Avoid words like duty, expectation, contract, pay, wage for example and terminology which infers contractual obligations i.e. that the volunteer is expected to do something in return for something. Volunteer Agreements should carefully set out intentions and express hopes instead of making binding demands.

Thirdly, a final point to note, a contract of employment does not have to be written but can be verbal too. This also applies to volunteering, so not having Volunteer Agreements, does not let you avoid this issue altogether.