

AGREEING PRINCIPLES

The idea of a developing a volunteer policy or agreeing the principles about how you work with volunteers can seem a bit daunting, but in practice it gives you the opportunity to consider the answers to questions that will inevitably crop up during your work with volunteers. Doing this in an organised way helps with consistency and transparency, can identify any gaps in guidelines and procedures and can help to ensure that volunteers have a good experience – all hopefully things to be welcomed!

For a church-based organisation working with volunteers, a volunteer policy is pretty indispensable and may well be required by external partners or funders. Some local churches may feel that a policy is too bureaucratic for the varied and often informal way in which they work with volunteers, an agreement of principles can still be very helpful.

A volunteer policy, or statement of agreed principles need not be a long, overly complicated document.

A succinct, clearly written summary of the main points will be a useful tool which can save a great deal of time further down the line, particularly, for example, if a leader of a project moves on and a new person takes over.

See next page for starting points

Starting points

It is helpful to agree the way in which you work with volunteers as this enables consistency and clarity.

The decisions that you agree can then lay a foundation for your work with volunteers throughout the church or organisation.

1

Consistency

Taking time to agree overall principles for your work with volunteers can be very positive:

- It helps to ensure fairness and avoid some groups of volunteers inadvertently being treated differently from others
- It can save time in the long run as you make decisions once and can then use those decisions as the basis for future work. This doesn't mean that decisions are set in stone; they can be reviewed in the light of how they work in practice but avoiding piecemeal decisions is a real aid to consistency, fairness and time-saving.

2

Clarity

Agreeing principles aids clarity, which can have many benefits for your ongoing work with volunteers:

- Making considered decisions and being explicit about the basis on which you work with volunteers helps to manage the expectations of all those involved and tends to reduce the likelihood of conflict in the long term. For example, are expenses reimbursed? Can volunteers expect to contribute to decisions about the future of the organisation?
- Clarity is linked to transparency, which can also minimise conflict in the long term. Making thoughtful decisions and communicating them openly, gives an opportunity for people to discuss whether principles are right and avoids the sense that decisions are made arbitrarily.

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Practicalities

A volunteer policy, or agreed statement, is really a series of answers to questions that then provide the framework for working with volunteers.

A full policy is more likely to be appropriate for a church based group or organisation with fairly formal structures, but even more informal setups can find that it is fruitful in the long run to go through some generic questions in a planned way.

For a policy to have credibility, and to work in practice, it needs to be honest, agreed and realistic; and those people working with volunteers need to be aware that it exists as a working document and guide.

Thinking about how you work with volunteers

Whether or not you develop a full volunteer policy, it is good to take some time to think about and celebrate what volunteers contribute and how you can best work together. Some questions to discuss could be:

1 What different groups of volunteers are involved?

These might include groups such as the coffee rota, crèche leaders, committees, authorised lay ministers etc.

2 How do people become volunteers?

Is that done in a way that is open and enables people to use their gifts?

3 Which groups of volunteers have a strong voice in the life of the church?

If some don't, should that be addressed?
How can you involve volunteers in thinking about what you do and in shaping any policy or principles?

4 Have you covered any administrative or legal issues relating to volunteers?

- a. Do you cover any expenses?
- b. Insurance
- c. Safeguarding
- d. Health and Safety

For more information, see *Managing Formalities*

5 Do different groups of volunteers have a coordinator?

Does this person act as a point of reference, look after that group of volunteers, help them develop and nurture their particular ministry?

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Practicalities (continued)

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What do you do if something goes wrong?

Are issues that arise dealt with in a way that is consistent with your Christian values? For more ideas see *Tackling Difficulties*.

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How easy is it for volunteers to rotate between roles?

Research shows that churches with rotation among people in volunteer leadership roles also report more growth – www.churchgrowthresearch.org.uk

7

How are volunteers valued and thanked?

Do all groups of volunteers get thanked or is the contribution of some more publicly acknowledged than others? How can you ensure that roles are explicitly and implicitly valued?

9

How do you communicate with volunteers?

Is it easy for all groups of volunteers to hear about, and be involved with, key developments and decisions that happen? If not, how could this be done better?

Writing a full policy

A volunteer policy is a really useful working document and if you want to advertise for volunteers through a volunteer centre they may well expect you to have a policy in place.

For a *Volunteer Policy Template* in the form of a series of questions, please see Church Urban Fund's volunteer resources page. For an example of the process of writing a policy, see the case study.

Illustrative Case Study: Agreeing a volunteer policy

Holy Nativity Church set up a Drop-in Centre and wanted to recruit volunteers from the church and the community. The Drop-in is run by Esther, a member of the congregation but not on the PCC (Holy Nativity's governing body).

Esther met with the churchwardens and advised them that a volunteer policy would be a good idea. As the Drop-in Centre was set up by the parish, they decided that the PCC (church council) needed to pass any policy but didn't have the expertise to write it.

Esther drafted a policy, using a suitable template, with the support of one of the Churchwardens. They agreed a date for it to go onto the PCC agenda, when Esther would introduce the draft and answer questions.

Esther went through the template and drafted the sections that were straightforward. For issues like insurance, expenses and DBS check where she needed to know the existing church systems she asked the churchwarden for guidance.

Esther and the churchwarden went through the draft policy together and realised that the issue of expenses was likely to provoke most discussion, since many members of the congregation volunteered without getting any expenses.

The draft policy went to PCC members in advance of the meeting to allow them time to consider it.

Most of the policy was easily agreed but there were questions about expenses. Esther explained that by offering to reimburse volunteers' travel expenses the church was opening itself up to volunteers who might otherwise not be able to volunteer. There was discussion around this point but the support of the churchwarden helped Esther make her case.

After the meeting, Esther produced a final copy of the policy. This was circulated to the whole PCC by e-mail but final sign off was delegated to Esther, the churchwarden and the vicar. Esther returned to the PCC six months after the Drop-in opened to report back on progress and to contribute to a review of the policy, including how the expenses system was working in practice

The agreed policy was circulated to the PCC, made available in the church office and used as the source of information about what volunteers can expect in terms of training, expenses, insurance etc. The key information from the policy is shared with each Drop-in volunteer during their induction.