

How to use this document

This guide is designed to help you create a volunteer handbook that reflects good practice, supports volunteers and avoids unintentionally creating employment relationships.

It is provided as a template that outlines the sections that you may wish to include in your own volunteer handbook. Suggestions are made for the possible content, which is based on best practice examples from across England, but we are unable to cover every possible scenario. We have included information on the purpose of each section, to help you understand why or when to include it.

We start this document with key considerations and general tips that you could use as conversation prompts with others, before you start writing your own volunteer handbook.

Your organisation/board of trustees/management committee (as appropriate) are responsible for deciding what is relevant for your own context.

Our suggested sections are:

- A welcome
- About [your organisation]
- Volunteer with us
- FAQs
- Learning, training and support
- Expenses
- Keeping everyone safe
- If you have a question or concern
- Helpful policies
- Useful links and resources
- Taking a break or ending your volunteering
- A warm thank you

Only include a section or information if it is relevant to what your organisation offers. For example, if you do not anticipate paying for expenses, you may not need an 'expenses' section, but referencing this elsewhere so volunteers have that information would be useful.

This document is designed to be given to volunteers who are already committed to volunteering with you, so it does not contain any information on the induction/orientation or getting started process. This is covered separately in the 'Volunteering - getting started process' document, also available from Spark Somerset.

Before you start - important considerations

Before you write your volunteer handbook, it is important that everyone understands what volunteering looks like in your organisation. When having these discussions with decision makers, people who you support and your wider community, we suggest keeping the following things in mind to avoid:

1. Using employment-style language
2. Creating implied obligations (e.g. attendance, notice periods etc)
3. Making the process too formal
4. Treating volunteers like unpaid staff

These are important factors for a variety of reasons. If the language you use is too similar to an employment contract, your volunteers may have rights as employees - not volunteers.

People volunteer because they want to. Your mission might align with their values, or it is clear to see the benefits they'll get. It can be easy to turn something someone chooses to do into something that feels like a chore. This might create extra demand or overwhelm for the individual, making it difficult to keep your volunteers involved.

TOP TIPS



If information you provide in your handbook - such as procedures - can be provided in a visual format as well as written (e.g. a flow chart), it is good practice to include this. Some people may find visuals more accessible to retain the information.

Consider information you're including in your handbook and how often it may change. Do you have places such as website links that you can signpost people to for the up to date information? For example, rather than providing information on staff members, you may wish to link to your 'meet the team' webpage

Reassurances such as "there are no silly questions" help volunteers understand the culture of your organisation. It can be easy to assume what others know (or don't) about your organisation. 'Simple' reminders like this can have a big - positive - impact on the volunteer experience.

How might you include volunteers in team days or training opportunities? Volunteers may not always be able to attend these events, but extending an invitation may be appreciated and reinforce the view that your volunteers are part of the team.

Spark Somerset also offer one pager advice sheets if you need to include information on specific volunteering contexts, such as: Youth volunteering • Short term/one off volunteers • Long term/ongoing volunteers • Micro volunteering • Remote/digital volunteers • Volunteers with additional support needs • Corporate and Employer Supported Volunteers

Volunteer Handbook - [Organisation name]

Welcome

Purpose: to warmly welcome volunteers to your organisation and explain the flexible, supportive nature of volunteering

Content could include:

- A warm welcome message
- A brief explanation that volunteering is always a choice
- A statement that this handbook is a guide, is not a contract and does not create any legal obligations for the individual or the organisation
- A short overview of what the handbook aims to help with (signposting, safety info etc)

TOP TIP



If it's a welcome from an individual in the organisation, it's great to include their photo!

This section could be written as a personal welcome from the leader of the organisation, or someone who sits on the management committee or board of trustees.

About [organisation name]

Purpose: to provide context for the volunteer - not direction

Content could include:

- Who your organisation is
- What your organisational aims are
- The communities or people you work with
- An explanation of how volunteers enhance the work (do not reference to volunteers 'delivering' or 'providing' core services)
- A simple overview of key staff (avoiding hierarchy or reporting lines)

TOP TIP



If you include information about people in the organisation, try framing this as 'people you may meet'

Volunteering with [us/organisation name]

Purpose: to paint a picture about what volunteering looks and feels like at your organisation

Content could include:

- An overview of the kinds of contributions that volunteers can make
- The values you hope volunteers feel aligned with
- A reassurance statement such as "As a volunteer with [organisation name], you are free to choose how and when you volunteer and you're welcome to step back at any time"

You may already include this information in your 'getting started' information for volunteers. It is good to repeat this as a reminder and to set the tone for your document - it also speaks to the wider, supportive culture of your organisation.

FAQs

Purpose: to provide information that may be useful to volunteers, in an easy and accessible format

Content could include:

- What do I wear?
- Will I get a name badge?
- Where do I park?
- Can I reach [organisation name] by public transport?
- What do I do/where do I go when I arrive for my volunteering?
- Are refreshments provided?
- Where do I eat my lunch/tea? (if appropriate, it would be useful to include any information about storing, preparing or heating food that you can offer to volunteers, plus anything to consider - e.g. named containers)
- How do I record my volunteer hours?
- What happens if something goes wrong? (to include who they contact and how they'll be supported)
- What other organisations does [organisation name] work with OR
- Who else might I come across in my volunteering? (it is good to include anyone who hires your building or support staff that may work unusual hours, e.g. cleaning staff)

There are also examples provided below of questions you may wish to include, if you don't feel you have enough information for a full section in the handbook:

- What training is available to me?
- Can I claim expenses? How do I do this?
- How can I meet up with other volunteers?
- How will I hear about what's going on at [organisation name]?
- What volunteer roles are on offer?
- Is there anything I need to know to do my volunteer role?

As in the previous section, this FAQ section - or parts of it - may be provided earlier on in the volunteer recruitment journey. It is good practice to duplicate this information, to ensure it is easy for a volunteer to find when they need it.

Learning, training and support

Purpose: to emphasise what is available to the volunteer to support them

Content could include:

- Training opportunities that volunteers may find helpful
- A statement that explains "some learning relates to safety and/or safeguarding and we'll make sure you're aware of any training which is relevant to your role that is legally required"
- Details of any support meetings that are offered (avoid calling these supervisions)
- Making it clear that volunteers are always welcome to ask questions or request support at any time. Provide details of how they may be able to do that
- The ways in which volunteers can provide feedback on their experience in the moment/as they go

Expenses

Purpose: to provide information about expenses without implying entitlement or compensation

Content could include:

- A statement such as “we can reimburse reasonable out of pocket expenses so that volunteering doesn’t cost you money”
- Information on how to claim expenses, with links to any forms or anything required for the process
- What a volunteer might need to be able to claim expenses - e.g. receipts
- Signposting of where to find, or ideally a direct link to your expenses policy



Avoid referring to any automatic/regular payments, to keep a clear distinction from employment

Keeping everyone safe

Purpose: to provide information on the steps you take to protect volunteers, staff and those you support

Content could include:

We have provided a few suggestions of different sections that you may wish to include. For each section, you may want to cover any or all of the following:

- What it is/means in simple terms
- Signposting to your policy - where to find it or a direct link
- Highlighting any ‘need to know’ information from the policy - e.g. procedure(s)
- Expectations that your organisation has from the volunteer. This should be simple - summarising anything in the policy in 1 or 2 sentences, not paragraphs of detail
- Expectations the volunteers should have from your organisation. Again, this should be simple and summarise anything in the policy in 1 or 2 sentences. For example, we’ll share with you how we keep data safe and how you can help

Sections with examples of basic content:

Confidentiality

- We ask volunteers to respect people’s privacy and handle information carefully, not sharing it with anyone else
- We’ll share with you how we keep data safe and how you can help

Safeguarding

- If you ever feel worried about someone’s wellbeing, please speak with a staff member so we can help
- We’ll provide guidance on what to look out for

Lone Working (if this applies to your organisation, ideally volunteers will not be volunteering alone)

- Let a named contact know when and where you plan to volunteer, as well as who you’ll be seeing
- Stay mindful of your own comfort and surroundings, contacting your agreed staff member if you ever feel uncertain or unsafe

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

- We aim to make volunteering welcoming for everyone (with examples)
- Let us know if you need anything that hasn't been listed to help you feel comfortable

Health and Safety

- Provide basic safety information (fire procedures, spaces, lone working guidance)
- Phrase expectations as "we encourage" instead of "you must"

If you have a question or concern

Purpose: to be clear about how volunteers can raise something, without having an 'HR' style system

Content could include:

- If something is worrying you or doesn't feel right, we encourage you to speak with the person you feel most comfortable talking to
- Avoid providing a process that involves stages, appeals, written decisions or timelines
- Keep any steps informal and relational
- Provide an alternative option - "if you would prefer to speak with someone else, you're welcome to speak with another member of the team or a trustee"



This may get covered in the 'Learning, Training and Support' section, but some orgs may want to keep this as it's own section

Helpful policies

Purpose: to signpost policies that frame the volunteering role and the context that the organisation operates in, rather than imposing ways of working on the volunteer

Content could include:

- An overview of why you have policies and how they support the organisation/staff/volunteers/people you work with and support
- How volunteers can access these policies, with reassurances that they are always available
- Encouragement for volunteers to make themselves aware of policies and procedures - not that volunteers 'must comply'
- Reassurance that volunteers will be included in notifications when policies are updated
- You may wish to include light summaries of the important policies such as:
 - Safeguarding
 - Data Protection
 - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
 - Health and Safety
 - Lone Working
 - Expenses
 - Confidentiality
 - Any other policy or procedure relevant to volunteering roles



To reduce the number of sections in your handbook, this could be combined with 'Keeping everyone safe'

Useful links and resources

Purpose: to signpost volunteers to things they may need access to on a regular basis as part of their role, in case they need a list to refer to

Content could include:

- Any organisations that you partner with
- Any details about your buildings/sites/locations
- Any informal or peer support for volunteers
- Where volunteers could find their own training - Spark Somerset website, online learning available to them, any training portal you use, or information about how volunteers will find out about training (e.g. any training opportunities will be shared on the volunteer group WhatsApp chat)
- Information about any buddy system that you may have
- Context or history about particular projects - links to webpages or funding bids, project plan documents etc
- Any organisational overview information not covered elsewhere
- Details of any important dates for your organisation (e.g. the date/month your organisation was founded, any recurring events you host or take part in, or awareness days/weeks that you mark in some way)
- Any information that could be taken for granted - things that you assume others 'just know'



You can decide whether you include useful links/resources for each section or put them all in one place

Taking a break or ending your volunteering

Purpose: to ensure volunteers know they have the freedom and choice to step back

Content could include:

- Reassuring statements such as "you're free to change, pause or stop your volunteering at any time" or "if possible, letting us know ahead of time helps us stay organised"
- Details of any optional goodbye conversations
- Details or link to any optional exit feedback form

We've been careful to provide suggestions for this section that ensure you're treating volunteers as volunteers - rather than accidentally treating them as workers or employees. This is important because treating a volunteer as an employee could have unintended legal consequences. It may be tempting to use language such as "you must let us know if you cannot attend". We know that many organisations rely on regular attendance of their volunteers.

We encourage you to read the information available on the [NCVO webpage - 'Involving Volunteers - volunteers and the law'](#) so that you can make an informed decision on how to approach this section within your own volunteer handbook.

A warm thank you

Purpose: to finish on a positive note and emphasise the appreciation you have for volunteers and what they mean to your organisation

Content could include:

- A message of gratitude
- Reinforcement that volunteering is optional and individuals have the power of choice
- Reassurance to volunteers that their time and contributions are valued

TOP
TIP



This could also be a personal thank you from a trustee or the leader of the organisation - include their photo!