Volunteers and volunteering

Introduction

Volunteers come from all walks of life and all sectors of society. They bring a wealth of personal experience, skills and interests to organisations and their value is widely recognised in the UK by the Government and employers.

There is no legal definition of a volunteer. However, the most commonly understood and widely used definition of volunteering is from the Compact and Code of Good Practice, Home Office, London 2005:

“an activity which involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment, individuals or groups other than (or in addition to) close relatives.”

The Compact is an agreement between Government and the voluntary and community sector in England. It recognises shared values, principles and commitments and sets out guidelines for how both parties should work together. It has five codes of good practice: volunteering, funding and procurement, consultation and policy appraisal, community groups and black and minority ethnic. For more information visit the Compact website: www.thecompact.org.uk/information/100023/publications

The NHS benefits both from volunteers assisting with its work and from the skills and experience its staff can gain through taking up opportunities with other organisations.

This chapter looks at the role and responsibilities of employers in relation to volunteers working for them and to their staff who wish to volunteer outside the NHS.

Volunteers in the NHS

Volunteers in the NHS are individuals who choose to freely commit their time and energy to support the work of the service, without receiving any financial benefit beyond reimbursement of expenses.

They bring tremendous value to the NHS, working in a variety of roles that enhance the services to patients that paid staff provide, and also assist the NHS in improving and developing services. The minimum age for volunteering in the NHS is 16, however, the majority of trusts operate an over 18 policy (depending on the type of volunteering undertaken); there is no upper limit, providing the individual is in good health. Individuals may consider volunteering in the NHS for a number of reasons, including:
• wanting to give something back after they or their family have benefited from services
• for moral reasons, or because they want to support a particular cause
• exploring a career in healthcare
• to fill spare time
• to gain some work experience
• to meet new people and make new friends
• to develop or maintain skills and experience
• to help develop specific services
• for spiritual fulfilment
• to help develop specific services
• for spiritual fulfilment
• to maintain or improve their health and well-being.

The partnership between volunteers and the NHS results in both parties giving and getting something back. Volunteers working in the NHS are expected to support staff and patients directly or indirectly. Volunteers are expected to be punctual, enthusiastic, committed and reliable.

Employer responsibilities

Employers are responsible for ensuring all staff, including volunteers, are fit for the work they are being asked to do (see the chapter on fitness for work) and for their health and safety at work (see the section on health and safety).

Although volunteers do not have a distinct legal status in the same way as paid workers and fall outside the definition of employees with regard to health and safety legislation, they are still protected by the duty of care and legal responsibilities on employers towards people they don’t employ, but who may be affected by their activities. Organisations have a duty of care towards volunteers, and those around them; as outlined in the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974.

Further information on volunteers and the law is available from Volunteering England: www.volunteering.org.uk

The legal position

Volunteers will need to undergo employment checks as specified in NHS Employers’ NHS Employment Check Standards: www.nhsemployers.org/recruitmentandretention/employment-checks/employment-check-standards/Pages/Employment-Check-Standards.aspx

These standards apply to permanent staff, staff on fixed-term contracts, temporary staff, volunteers, students, trainees, contractors and highly mobile staff employed through an agency.

Not all volunteers require a Criminal Records Bureau Check (CRB), but, where posts involve access to patients and service users as part of their normal duties, a CRB check will also have to be made. The NHS Employment Check Standards include all pre-appointment checks that are required by law and those that are mandated by DH policy. They form part of the robust risk assessment process which ensures patient and public safety, as well as the health and safety of the volunteer in question.

In addition to CRB checks, individuals who intend to engage in regulated activity2 with children and vulnerable adults will be required to register with the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) from July 2010. The CRB check and registering with the ISA is free for volunteers. However, should a volunteer take up a paid post at a later date which requires registration with the ISA, they will be asked to pay the registration fee.


Volunteer policy

When employing volunteers it is useful to have a policy statement that helps to define the role of volunteers within the organisation and how they can expect to be treated. The existence of a volunteer policy helps:

• demonstrate an organisation’s commitment both to its volunteer programme and to the individual volunteers. Having a policy in place shows that an organisation cares and that it has thought through its volunteer programme

• volunteers to know where they stand. It offers them some security by letting them know how they can expect to be treated, and where they can turn to if they feel that things are going wrong

---

2 Regulated activity is defined as: Any activity involving contact with children and/or vulnerable adults and is of a specified nature, for more detail see: www.nhsemployers.org/RecruitmentAndRetention/Employment-checks/New%20vetting%20and%20Barring/Pages/Faqs-Vetting-Barring-Scheme.aspx#q15
• ensure fairness and consistency. Volunteers are made up from a diverse range of people and having a written policy ensures that decisions are not made on an ad hoc basis, and that all volunteers are treated equally and fairly.

There are no hard and fast rules about what a volunteer policy should look like, as each organisation has its own unique needs and these will need to be reflected. However, there are some specific issues that should always be covered such as:

• a brief explanation of what the organisation does, and why it involves volunteers in its work

• recruitment process for volunteers, ie
  i) how it advertises for volunteers
  ii) how volunteers will be interviewed
  iii) what the procedure is for dealing with people who are not right for a particular role they are interested in

• a diversity policy that shows how the organisation is committed to diversity in all areas of its work

• information on how volunteers are inducted and trained within the organisation. If a trial period is used, which allows volunteers to discover whether or not a particular role is for them, then this should be included here

• information on how volunteers can access training relevant to their role

• information about insurance cover for volunteers, which should be either public or employer’s liability cover

• health and safety information

• information on problem solving procedures. If a volunteer has a grievance with the organisation they need to know what is the procedure. Similarly, if a volunteer has acted inappropriately they need to know what the course of action will be

• a confidentiality agreement should be in place for volunteers that binds them to the same requirements as paid staff. This will help to reassure staff/people working with the organisation that volunteers will not act in an unprofessional manner.

**Investing in Volunteers standard**

‘Investing in Volunteers’ is the UK quality standard for all organisations that involve volunteers in their work. The standard enables organisations to comprehensively review their volunteer management and also publicly demonstrate their commitment to volunteering. Please note that achieving Investing in Volunteers does have some cost implications for NHS trusts. For all
NHS staff and volunteer work

Becoming a volunteer can give an individual the chance to enjoy a variety of challenging and rewarding experiences, gain new skills and gain personal fulfilment. Pursuing activities such as voluntary work can improve an employee’s work-life balance and the Improving Working Lives (IWL) programme supports employers to make it easier for staff to commit to voluntary activities if they wish. For more details on Improving Working Lives, see the chapter on Improving Working Lives. For employers wishing to support staff in their volunteering activities see the Volunteering in the NHS webpages: www.nhsemployers.org/HealthyWorkplaces/Pages/Volunteers_and_volunteerin g.aspx

Employer-supported volunteering

Many employers support their staff to volunteer or engage with voluntary bodies. Employer-supported volunteering programmes take the form of an employer supporting existing volunteering by employees, either during or out of work hours or by helping to develop a volunteer programme with a community partner, existing volunteer organisation or charity. Volunteering England provide a comprehensive guide for employers who wish to support their employees’ volunteering ambitions or who wish to actively engage with a community partner to develop or support a volunteering project: www.volunteering.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projects+and+initiatives/Employer+Supported+Volunteering/

In its research, Volunteering England found that employers with successful employee-supported volunteer programmes discovered that it gave them a positive profile in not only in the local community but with other businesses, their customers and staff. Staff were more likely to stay with the company and felt more motivated and positive about their organisation. Several research studies (for example by the Institute of Psychiatry and University of Wales at Lampeter) have demonstrated the positive impact of volunteering on the mental and general health of the volunteers.

Costs and benefits


4 www.volunteering.org.uk/WhatWeDo/Projects+and+initiatives/volunteeringinhealth/What+Impact+Does+Volunteering+Really+Have+On+Health.htm
Volunteering in the NHS offers benefits to the organisation, the volunteer, patients and service users. The roles which volunteers perform should be complementary and supportive to the work undertaken by paid staff, they should not replace roles that could be undertaken by paid staff.

It is important to recognise the benefits that volunteers bring to the NHS and for themselves.

- Undertaking tasks that enhance the service provided by paid staff and assist the NHS in developing and improving service delivery.
- Providing complimentary services that paid staff are often too time restricted to provide, such as library services, visiting patients, shopping or fundraising.
- Supporting self-help groups and initiatives such as the Expert Patients Programme (EPP) [www.expertpatients.co.uk/public/default.aspx](http://www.expertpatients.co.uk/public/default.aspx) and within centres dispensing information prescriptions: [www.informationprescription.info](http://www.informationprescription.info)
- Becoming a volunteer can provide a pathway into work, offering an individual the chance to gain skills, gain confidence, grow and develop.
- Where an individual has a health or social care need themselves volunteering can help empower them and make positive life changes.
- Personal pride and fulfilment – feeling of being valued, giving something back to the NHS and making a positive difference to other people’s lives.
- Gaining a new skill or new understanding of the organisation’s dynamics.
- Enabling staff to focus on their main role, by providing practical help.
- Staff undertaking volunteering opportunities can benefit themselves and the organisation by gaining new skills and competencies they are unable to access through their job.

While there may be an initial outlay when a volunteer starts with an organisation this will be recouped over time in the value the individual adds to service delivery. Costs related to engaging volunteers are usually associated with uniforms, insurance, reimbursement of expenses and training costs. CRB checks are, and registering with the ISA in 2010 will be, free.

The National Association of Voluntary Service Managers (NAVSM) can provide examples of how volunteering has worked well in the NHS and offers the opportunity for voluntary service managers and co-ordinators to share advice and information. To contact NAVSM and to find out how other NHS Trusts have successfully involved volunteers and what the associated costs have been go to [www.navsm.org.uk](http://www.navsm.org.uk)
Disadvantages

It may be the case that staff could be taken away from delivering services to support and train volunteers. However, it should be appreciated that once volunteers become fully trained and engaged in assisting service delivery, staff will be more supported to fulfil their role. While a comprehensive induction process will help volunteers to understand the healthcare setting, appropriate types of behaviour and how their role fits in with that of the staff, and minimise any possible disruption to service delivery.

Employers should view volunteering as a positive activity which can contribute to an employee’s lifelong learning. Occasionally staff may wish to undertake a longer-term project which could involve taking unpaid leave or a sabbatical. The positive side of this is that staff can return refreshed, motivated and with new skills and knowledge to share with the organisation.

This type of activity has larger cost implications for the employer in terms of replacing staff, recruitment and other related costs. Careful planning and thought will need to be given as to how the organisation will manage the process and what the impact will be on the staff still in post. Viewed positively, this type of situation can offer other staff the opportunity for temporary promotion, the chance for a team to try new ways of working and the chance for new staff to join the team.

There are always some risks and disadvantages for an employer when staff wish to embark on a longer-term volunteer project. However, it is more often the case that employers gain through the skills and experiences the employee brings back to the organisation and their role.

Employer checklist

- Consider employing a voluntary service manager or co-ordinator.
- Work in partnership with staff side groups, patient groups, HR and volunteers when developing new volunteer opportunities.
- Consider how to support staff who wish to volunteer.
- Consider how to recognise the value of international work for professional development, improving workforce retention, and promoting working with diversity.
- Look at how supporting volunteers and volunteering give the organisation a positive image as an employer: See Employer Supported Volunteering, Volunteer England:
Could volunteers help the organisation fulfil its targets? Volunteers can bring value in a variety of roles that enhance services, assist staff and patients.

Involve young people and jobseekers – volunteering is a good way to showcase the different professions in the NHS and to provide a pathway into work.

Older people bring experience, maturity and often the time to listen.

Consider how to make the best of new skills employees acquire through volunteering.

Consider possible continued networking arrangements, for example with a non-governmental organisation such as Voluntary Services Overseas or with health organisations in developing countries.

Consider involvement in wider town/city networking initiatives with other local partners. ‘Business in the Community’ provides extensive advice and information.

**Employee responsibilities**

Time off should be agreed with reasonable notice and should not be in conflict with paid work or bring the organisation into disrepute.

It is vital for an individual to have insurance for any period they will be travelling or living abroad. It is important to check the finer points of the insurance cover with the insurance company to establish excess requirements and the amount of cover for loss or illness or medical cover.

An individual wishing to work overseas should also be aware of the need to explore separate medical malpractice cover.

If an individual is considering working abroad this can result in the suspension of membership of the NHS Pension Scheme. See [www.nhspa.gov.uk](http://www.nhspa.gov.uk) for details.

**Financial assistance**

The Department of Health, the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing have made available a fund to cover incidental expenses of teams undertaking humanitarian projects. Applications to this fund may be made by an individual or staff group within the NHS or Special Health Authority, with applications from multidisciplinary teams being particularly welcome.
For more information, email internationalinfo@bma.org.uk or write to International Department, British Medical Association, BMA House, Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9JP.

More information

NHS Employers’ volunteering webpages: www.nhsemployers.org/HealthyWorkplaces/Pages/Volunteers_and_volunteering.aspx

Volunteering England website: www.volunteering.org.uk

Volunteers across the NHS: improving the patient experience and creating a patient-led service (2006)

Improving working lives: the value of supporting staff who volunteer, Department of Health: www.dh.gov.uk

British Council: www.britishcouncil.org

British NGOs for Development: www.bond.org.uk

British Red Cross: www.redcross.org.uk