

RISK ASSESSMENT & VOLUNTEERS

INFORMATION SHEET

Key questions:

- What is risk?
- Why assess risk within your volunteer programme?
- What types of risk can be associated with involving volunteers?
- How do I keep it manageable?
- What is the process for assessing and managing risks?
- Where can I get further information and advice?

What is risk?

Risk is everywhere. Every action we take, from crossing the road to trying something for the first time, is a calculated risk.

Risk describes the uncertainty surrounding events and their outcomes that may have a significant effect, either positive or negative, on:

- Operational performance
- Achievement of aims and objectives
- Meeting expectations of stakeholders.

(Adapted from the Charity Commission's guidelines)

The process of risk assessment is designed to enable you to control and minimise risk and its impact. No activity is risk free and even with good planning it may be impossible to eliminate the risks from any activity. However, if something does go wrong, good risk management should help to minimise the impact of the event.

Why assess risk within your volunteer programme?

Organisations that involve volunteers are well aware of the benefits they bring. However, they are not always adequately prepared for things going wrong which may cause significant harm to the volunteer, service users or beneficiaries, colleagues or the organisation itself.

There are a number of very good reasons why volunteer involving organisations should take the time to assess risk:

- To protect their organisation and its resources
- To protect service users and beneficiaries
- To reassure funders
- To maximise effectiveness through applying good practice to address areas of potential weakness

Ultimately, however, it is worth assessing risk in your volunteer programme because you value volunteers and want to ensure that, as far as possible, they do not suffer harm arising from volunteering.

Risk assessment is about much more than health and safety. However, it is worth remembering that every organisation has a responsibility to ensure the health and safety of everyone that comes into contact with it. Volunteers and the activities of volunteers are no exception. Risk assessment is an important tool to help organisations meet this responsibility. It is an essential part of good volunteer management and should not be seen as an add-on.

The chances are that your organisation already carries out an informal risk assessment when purchasing insurance but remember that *“risk management is not about buying insurance. It is not about avoiding lawsuits. Instead it is about protecting and conserving your organisations resources and providing goods and services reasonably.”* (Laird Hunter 1998)

What types of risk can be associated with involving volunteers?

The more demanding the volunteer role and the more contact the volunteer has with clients the greater the potential risks. However, even the most seemingly benign role needs to be assessed to identify what could potentially go wrong. The following are just some examples:

Risks to the organisation, its reputation or its funding through, for example:

- Volunteer misrepresenting the organisation through speaking or acting inappropriately
- Volunteer breaching confidentiality
- Service users suffering harm through abuse by a volunteer

Risks to service users/beneficiaries through, for example:

- Volunteer providing inaccurate information or advice
- Volunteer failing to provide adequate standard of care
- Volunteer breaching confidentiality.

Risks to the volunteer through, for example:

- Organisation failing to provide adequate training
- Organisation failing to meet relevant health and safety standards
- Organisation having inadequate policies and procedures to protect, support and supervise volunteers whilst engaged in voluntary work

Risk of harm to colleagues through, for example:

- volunteer acting outside of role description and exceeding skills and/or authority
- substandard performance by a volunteer
- theft or fraud by a volunteer.

How do I keep it manageable?

Unfortunately it becomes very easy to see risks in every activity which can make us fearful of engaging volunteers in any capacity. However, the process of risk assessment helps to identify the really significant risks which should be given particular attention and provides a framework

for identifying appropriate actions that should be taken to reduce risks. Implementing this process is in itself a significant step in reducing the overall level of risk.

While managing risk is very important it is equally important that the measures used do not place unnecessary or impractical regulations on volunteers preventing them from carrying out their roles fully. It is also important that the process of risk assessment does not become excessive or onerous for the organisation. Organisations commencing the risk management process should remember that the rule of thumb is “*reasonable measures, reasonably applied*”.

What is the process for assessing and managing risk?

The risk assessment process involves working systematically through four key steps:

1. **identifying** the risks faced
2. **categorising** the seriousness of these risks according to likelihood and impact
3. identifying and implementing measures for **managing** the risks
4. regularly **reviewing** your risk assessment to factor in change.

In order to be effective, your approach should be:

- systematic
- regular
- recorded
- involving all appropriate people
- monitored
- reviewed
- effectively communicated.

1. Identifying risks

The first step is to start to list the risks that exist within your volunteer programme. In order to do this you will need to review volunteering within your organisation on three levels:

- the activities and functions of each volunteer role
- how volunteers are recruited, selected, inducted and managed
- any particular risks associated with the *individuals* carrying out these roles

Remember to consider whether there is potential for harm to the volunteer, service users/beneficiaries, colleagues and the organisation.

2. Categorising risks

Secondly, you need to be able to identify which risks are the most serious and which are fairly minor. By systematically categorising the risks identified, you are able to identify which warrant the most attention.

For each risk identified in the previous stage, rate the level of risk according to the **likelihood** of it happening and the seriousness of the potential **impact** were it to happen. You may find it helpful to use a scale (e.g. High, Medium & Low).

Now prioritise the risks according to the rating given. Those which have higher risk ratings (e.g. those that are both *high likelihood* and *high impact*) should be given much greater and more urgent attention.

3. Manage the risk

The next step is to look at what can be done to reduce the likelihood and lessen the impact of the identified risks. Risks can be managed in a number of ways.

You can:

- Avoid the risk
- Control the risk
- Finance the risk
- Transfer the risk

The first aim should be to remove the risk completely. This may involve ceasing the activity or parts of the activity. If this is not possible steps should be taken to reduce the risk. This may involve reviewing and adjusting practice, adopting new policies or practices or providing additional training.

- *Avoid the risk* – If the activity is not core (i.e. if the organisation's objectives can be met in other ways) and if the level of risk cannot be satisfactorily reduced through other means, you may decide not to engage in this activity or provide this service.
Example: A youth project decides not to offer white water rafting on their residential trips due to the level of risk involved. Objectives are still met through other activities on these trips.
- *Control the risk* – This is the most common approach. If an activity is core for your organisation then you will need to identify what good practice policies must be adhered to, what staff and volunteer training is needed to ensure these are implemented and how this is to be recorded and monitored. Controlling risk involves implementing measures to both *reduce the likelihood* of a negative outcome and to *reduce the impact* of such an outcome.
Example: A community crèche identifying risks around child protection develops good child protection policies which it communicates to all staff, monitors and regularly reviews. Good record keeping demonstrates that these provisions have been put in place.
- *Finance the risk* – You may alternatively decide to provide resources to meet the liabilities caused by the risks when they happen.
Example: An organisation which risks losing volunteers due to the costs incurred in volunteering, may decide to allocate a budget to cover volunteer expenses.
- *Transfer the risk* – It may be possible to transfer the consequences of the risk to another person or organisation. This can be through insurance, indemnity, exemption from liability or through transferring the activity to another organisation. However, it is vital to remember that if you as an organisation fail to take reasonable steps to prevent risk then you may still be liable despite insurance or any form of indemnity or exemption from liability clause.

You may be surprised to find how many measures you already have in place (mitigating factors) that help reduce the risks faced. This stage is an opportunity to document and review measures to reduce risk by considering:

- What are you doing already to reduce the level of risk?
- Is there anything more that you could or should do?

When this is done you need to decide when these further measures should be taken or implemented and who will be responsible.

A sample template is included at Appendix 1.

4. Review the risks

Risk management is a continuous process and should be regularly reviewed. It is not enough to complete and document these steps and to feel that in itself that is enough. Having agreed your action plan, you need to schedule in a review to check that things have been done and if appropriate review the risk rating as a result of the action you have taken.

Risks should be kept under review and any new practices evaluated to ascertain if they had the desired effect of reducing risk and creating a safer environment for all. Any new volunteer roles or activities and new individuals recruited for these roles should be subject to a risk assessment.

Review of risk assessment within the volunteer programme should feed into the risk management processes within your organisation as a whole.

Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure information in this publication is accurate. However it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith without accepting liability. If relevant, we therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking any action on the matters covered herein. Charity (Inland Revenue) No. XT22896. Company Limited by Guarantee No. NI602399. Registered in Northern Ireland.

Where can I get further information and advice?

Further information on Risk Management within the charitable sector can be accessed from the following sources:

ACOVO, Charity Commission – Charities and Risk Management

DIY Committee Guide (Guidance and simple templates for implementing a risk management within your organisation)

Health and Safety Executive

NCVO – Managing Risk: Guidelines for Medium Sized Organisations

NICVA – Member Services Advice Note 13: Risk Management

Volunteer Now

A range of other relevant publications can be downloaded from the Volunteer Now website

<http://www.volunteernow.co.uk>

Child Protection, Our Duty to Care – gives details of practice which minimises risk of harm to children.

Volunteer Management Information, As Good as They Give, Book 5 - Volunteers and the Wider Organisation, pgs 11 -16

Volunteers and Insurance Information Sheet

Wales Council for Voluntary Action – The Safer Volunteering Guidebook

Appendix 1 - Template Risk Assessment

Describe the area/role this assessment covers:							
Identify MAIN RISKS to people, property and /or organisation's work and reputation	Evaluate the seriousness of these risks:		How can you manage these risks?				REVIEW
	Likelihood of risk High/Medium/Low	Magnitude of risk High/Medium/Low	1. Stop the Activity Action needed/ Mitigating factors:	2. Reduce the risk/ Minimise the harm Action needed/ Mitigating factors:	3. Finance the Risk Action needed/ Mitigating factors:	4. Transfer the liability Action needed/ Mitigating factors:	How and when will you review the risks in this area?
a)							
b)							