Creating an inclusive volunteering environment

Why is creating an inclusive environment important?

Understanding the needs of all of your volunteers and making sure they feel valued and respected increases the likelihood of volunteers choosing to commit for longer periods of time. Openly communicating your values and strategies on equality, diversity and inclusion will also help you attract a wider pool of potential volunteers and skills. As a result, potential volunteers from minority groups will feel more at ease applying for volunteering opportunities in organisations that makes their commitment to inclusion known.

How do I undertake an inclusion review?

Think about your organisation or group: its size, the type of work it does, where it is located, who it employs, who uses its services, what type of volunteer opportunities you offer and what its goals are; and think about how it could become more inclusive. When reviewing inclusion and equality in your organisation, you should consider the following areas:

Demographics

All organisations and groups are different, so the first thing you will need to do is look at who is in your organisation at the moment. It is good practice for your organisation or group to monitor the diversity of the volunteer team and put in place steps to increase diversity and representation from the local community. You may use a monitoring form. However, it is important that you only collect information that you will use and that you follow the correct data protection guidelines. There is more on this in the 'Volunteers and Equality and Diversity' guide.

Formal policies and procedures

The formal policies and practices of your organisation or group can tell you a lot about how much you have thought about inclusion, human rights and equality. It is important that equality and diversity are considered when you are developing any new policy and procedure so that it becomes embedded in day to day practice. When reviewing these policies, you will find it helpful to look at:

Volunteer Policy	Your organisation or group should have a written volunteer policy on volunteer involvement. This should set out values for volunteer involvement and highlight the need for procedures for managing volunteers, based on principles of equality and diversity. There is more information on this in the ***Developing a Volunteer Policy*** guide.
Vision, mission and core values	You should establish and communicate your vision, mission and values which are based on principles of equality and diversity.
General human resource policies	Where the organisation has policies for staff, volunteers should have their own equivalent policy and should only be included in general policies if appropriate.

Matching the right volunteer to the right role	Your recruitment procedures should be transparent and equally accessible to all applicants. It is good practice to detail the recruitment process and share this will all potential volunteers. The volunteer role descriptions should focus on objective criteria that are solely related to the role in question. There is more information on this in the **Matching the Right Volunteer to the Right Role** guide.
Service provision and customer equality policies	If you are a service provider, you should have a strategy in place to make sure that all service users are treated equally and fairly. It is good practice to engage volunteers in recognising and meeting the diverse backgrounds of your service users and that you educate your service users to appreciate that the people that support them may be volunteers.
Health and safety policies	It is important to take health and safety of your volunteers seriously. You should ensure you have clear health and safety policies in place, with regular risk assessment and checks to promote volunteer health and wellbeing. It is important to consider if your health and safety policies have an impact on the religion or belief of volunteers: for example wearing religious dress or articles of faith or female volunteers going out alone to visit service users in their homes. There is more information on this in the **Volunteer Health and Safety** guide.
Managing challenging situations	Sometimes volunteers may feel that they have not been treated fairly and may make a complaint. In the first instance you should have an 'open door' policy so that volunteers can talk about, and potentially resolve, any concerns before they become bigger problems. In the event that this is not effective, you should have clear procedures to deal with volunteer problems or complaints that are understood by all staff working with volunteers and accessible to volunteers. The procedures need to be fair to all and not impact negatively on particular groups of volunteers. Volunteers should have access to an independent arbitration or dispute resolution process if they do not agree with the outcome or any investigation you have carried out. There's more on this in the **Managing Challenging Volunteer Situations** guide.
Policies to deal with discrimination, bullying and harassment	It is important that you have clear and well-known policies that set out how you hope volunteers will behave. These should state the importance of treating others with dignity and respect, set out what is contained within equality and human rights legislation, explain what discrimination and harassment are, and state the consequences of unacceptable behaviour. Anyone who supervises volunteers need to be clear about these policies and trained to act quickly when dealing with complaints. You may choose to have a procedure in place that supports volunteers and staff to challenge stereotypical views and deliberate acts of discrimination, harassment, bullying or offensive language.

Policies on being flexible	Volunteers often have other things going on in their personal lives and your practice and procedures should deal with requests to volunteer flexibly in a fair and objective manner. This could relate to a number of areas such as: holidays or unexpected changes in circumstance; procedures for carers, parents and expectant parents; ill health and taking individual needs and cultural differences into account.
Reward and recognition policies	Volunteers don't do it for money, so it is important to recognise their contributions and achievements. Your policies on reward and recognition should be clearly organised, based on objective criteria and easily understood by volunteers. It may be useful if you are a big organisation or group to carry out a reward audit to make sure that volunteers are treated fairly and rewarded equally.
Policies and procedures on training and development	It is valuable to run regular training on diversity, equality and human rights, this can help everyone to understand how an inclusive environment should look and what responsibility they each have to help implement it. Organisations may consider having regular articles in their volunteer or client newsletter that profile aspects of diversity or participate in equality events such as international woman's day or mental health week.
Procurement policies	You may wish to review the procedures you have in place for procurement to ensure that they include equality and human rights measures. You may consider it unacceptable to procedure from an organisation that does not share your organisation or group's values. Some organisations require potential suppliers to provide evidence in their tenders that they take equality and human rights seriously.

The working environment

Looking at your organisations culture can be difficult to do, but the aim is to find out if there are gaps between what is written in your policies and everyday volunteering practices within your organisation or group. Some areas to think about include:

Leaders show commitment to equality and diversity	It is important that senior management send out a clear message about equality and diversity during development days and participate in equality awareness raising training days or events.
Staff and volunteer attitudes and behaviours	It is good practice to encourage an open and understanding working culture where everyone is treated with dignity and respect. Staff and volunteers should be aware of the importance of equality, human rights and inclusion, and aware of the relevant policies. Respond to volunteer's needs and find out how volunteers would like to be treated in order to make them feel more comfortable with you. Be careful not to be intrusive and ask only to improve practice or because you are genuinely interested to learn. One way of measuring how you are doing regarding this is through an anonymous attitude survey.

Staff consultation and participation	You should have clear procedures so volunteers can communicate with managers and directors. It might be possible to offer volunteers the opportunity to join the board as a representative or make sure that volunteers are consulted on changes to policies and practices that will affect their volunteering lives. If you're not doing anything like this then volunteers may feel that changes are being forced upon them without the chance to give their opinions.
Working patterns and segregation	You should consider if volunteers with diverse backgrounds and from different groups work together in teams and divisions. If not, then it's likely that there may be divisions within the volunteer team on the grounds of gender, ethnic background, age, religion or belief, language, culture and class.
Activities	It is good practice to offer and organise opportunities to bring volunteers and staff together and to promote inclusion and understanding. You should review if these activities are well attended or if the planning takes account of the access requirements of different groups, as well as caring responsibilities and cultural differences.
Take-up rate of services by volunteers	It can be helpful to review the take up rates of the services you have in place for volunteers, for example volunteering breaks, time off for dependents, use of counselling service or access to religious facilities. If they are low, it may be that the volunteering culture in your organisation or group is not supportive of the provisions in place, or those volunteers or staff who manage them, are not aware of what is available.
Images that reflect diversity and equality	Use images and descriptions of the organisation that reflects the diversity of the community, your volunteers and staff and are appropriate to the objectives of your organisation or group, for example make sure your images shows the age range of your volunteers.

What next?

Remember that your organisation will be shaped by the job you have to do. There may be standards, legal requirements and duties that you have to comply with in your sector. Or you might provide services for very diverse or very similar communities and service users. You might suffer from skill or volunteer shortages or you may be located within an industry or sector that has traditionally been filled with one gender, ethnic group or volunteers of certain ages. Your volunteers might be spread out over different locations that rarely come together face to face. All of these factors will influence what is contained in your action plan.

Having reviewed the workplace for your volunteers in terms of equality and inclusion, the next stage is to decide upon the action you will take. Set out the key changes you would like to make as a result of your review. Prioritise these changes to help you decide where to start.

Remember you will need to set aside time regularly to review the strategy and action plan, to ensure it is up to date. You should involve volunteers in the review process. Even if you don't make big changes, a regular review will allow for updates and emphasise its importance to the organisation or group.

Need some more help?

If you would like more help or advice in relation to this guide please get in touch with us:

- Telephone: 01786 479593
- Email: hello@volunteerscotland.org.uk
- Website: www.volunteerscoltand.org.uk