

# Creating a volunteer programme

A successful volunteer programme has the ability to build positive relationships with families that many public sector professionals can find difficult to reach, offering considerable benefit to society



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In recent years, with the NHS, schools and children's services all tightening their belts, volunteer programmes have become increasingly important for vulnerable families. Volunteers offer a unique contribution because they are usually perceived as independent with no agenda other than to support the beneficiaries and contribute something positive to society. Generally speaking, they do not encounter the trust barriers many public sector professionals face when working with vulnerable families.

The social work profession is very familiar with this problem. The stigma of social work involvement can make it challenging for social workers to build trusting relationships with clients. Our Volunteers Supporting Families (VSF) programme helps address this. Trained volunteers commit to visiting a vulnerable family on a weekly basis for at least six months. During these visits, which typically last for two to six hours, the volunteers provide practical and emotional support for families dealing with serious life challenges such as substance misuse, unemployment, poor housing and chronic physical and mental health conditions.

York Consulting, who evaluated our VSF programme in 2015, found every £1 spent on VSF brought about a social return on investment – in terms of adverse outcomes avoided – of

£2.23. The consultants interviewed 48 families. All were “extremely positive” about their experience of working with a VSF volunteer. We have also had glowing reviews from the social workers we support.

Volunteering Matters has more than 50 years' experience of managing volunteering programmes throughout the UK, and runs more than 180 programmes across the UK.

Through trial and error we have learned what works, and what doesn't. It is not enough to simply recruit any volunteers and match them with any beneficiaries. There need to be clear and robust best practice procedures at every step of the journey to ensure quality standards are maintained, and the experience is safe, productive and – hopefully – enjoyable for both the volunteer and the beneficiary.

## Role description

We insist all our volunteers are provided with a clear, written role description. This document specifies the practical tasks the volunteer will complete and the personal qualities, such as empathy, sensitivity, commitment and discipline that they will need to excel in the role. It is crucial the volunteer understands what is expected of them, and that it is a responsibility – and a privilege – to work with vulnerable people. Volunteers should always have an induction before they begin their placement, so they have a clear understanding of the environment they will be in and what they are required to do.

Volunteer managers must be vigilant in conducting risk assessments to ensure the environment is safe and appropriate for the volunteer. There should also be a volunteer code of conduct. This document provides a benchmark for acceptable behaviour during the volunteer placement. If a volunteer oversteps the mark, their manager must meet with them and explain why they need to change their behaviour. If they continue to overstep the mark, their volunteer placement should be terminated. We must always prioritise the safety and wellbeing of our beneficiaries – we are there to support them, first and foremost.

Once the right volunteers have been recruited, the challenge is to retain them. As with employee engagement, communication is key. We need to be sure all volunteers are in regular contact with their volunteer manager. For volunteers in caring or social work settings, this contact is likely to be in the form of weekly

supervision sessions. In other settings, it may be a brief email or phone call once a week or fortnight, to discuss any issues that have arisen.

In addition to listening to the volunteers and supporting them in their role, it is essential to reward your volunteers. At Volunteering Matters, we run various social events. For example, the mentors and mentees who take part in our Grandmentors programme, which matches older volunteers to young care leavers, are invited to an annual House of Lords drinks reception. Other volunteer programmes run Christmas parties and quarterly social events. Many of our volunteer managers send birthday cards to their volunteers, and get well soon cards when they are unwell.

Running an excellent volunteer programme requires commitment, creativity and hard work – but it is worth it. The support the voluntary sector provides to vulnerable families and individuals is priceless. If you can see the potential for a volunteer programme in your local area then I urge you to get in touch with us. We have a number of tried and tested business models that we know can create tangible change for individuals and communities. We also have decades of experience of working closely with local authorities, schools and other public and third sector organisations. We wholeheartedly believe in the power of volunteering – if you think we could help you set up a local programme, don't hesitate to contact us.

## TOP TIPS

- Secure funding for more than two years if possible - volunteer programmes need time to bed in
- Provide volunteers with a clear, written role description
- Measure the impact of your project - collect robust quantitative and qualitative data from volunteers and beneficiaries
- Support your volunteers throughout the placement - ask them what is and isn't working
- Don't be afraid to terminate a volunteer programme that is not achieving its goals - go back to the drawing board and see how you can use the experience to come up with something better