

Scottish  
Volunteering  
Forum



# Optimising Health and Wellbeing Benefits from Volunteering

Good Practice for Engaging and Supporting Volunteers

# Contents

<b>Page 3</b>	Overview
<b>Page 4</b>	Step 1: Inspire and encourage
<b>Page 5</b>	Step 2: Prepare
<b>Page 6</b>	Step 3: Identify
<b>Page 7</b>	Step 4: Engage
<b>Page 8</b>	Step 5: Impact
<b>Page 9</b>	Step 6: Resolve
<b>Page 10</b>	Step 7: Sustain
<b>Page 11</b>	Step 8: Recognise and celebrate
<b>Page 12</b>	Step 9: Moving on
<b>Page 13</b>	Acknowledgements
<b>Page 14</b>	Call to action



# Overview

This guide is structured in nine stages relevant to the engagement, management and support of volunteers. Links to relevant resources, documents and templates are provided.

Individuals with the most to gain through volunteering can often be difficult to engage and the easiest to ignore. Volunteering may be something they have never considered doing and they may not know anybody who volunteers. They may face a range of practical, emotional and structural barriers to engaging in volunteering.

**This guide provides hints and tips on how to:**



Engage with people from varying backgrounds, with multiple and complex experiences, and help ensure that they have an excellent volunteering experience.



Optimise the health and wellbeing benefits for existing volunteers.



Ensure that those who support volunteers safeguard their own health and wellbeing whilst juggling the competing demands of their workload.





1

## Inspire and Encourage

Traditional recruitment methods like posters and flyers have their place, but they have their limitations in engaging and inspiring people who do not see themselves as 'volunteers'. You need to think creatively of ways to engage and communicate the benefits of volunteering.

### Use trusted relationships

It is important to build links with people who have trusted relationships with potential volunteers. This could be family, friends, support staff, community nurses and occupational therapists. Ensure they have accurate information about what volunteering is (and what it isn't) and know how to support and encourage their clients to get involved.



[Support Workers and Volunteering](#)  
VolunteerWiki

### Use real stories

Use real stories that potential volunteers can identify with. Engage 'champions' – current volunteers who have fulfilling roles and are willing to share the stories of how volunteering has benefitted their health and wellbeing. This could be in person, for example at events, or online.



[Inspiring Volunteer Stories](#)  
Volunteer Scotland

[MyVolunteering](#)  
Volunteer Edinburgh



Volunteers with lived experience of issues such as mental health problems, addictions or disability have a particularly powerful story to tell. Engage them as 'ambassadors' to share their experiences with support groups and service users.



2

## Prepare

Ensure that your team (paid staff and existing volunteers) are understanding and prepared to involve volunteers who may require additional support or need their role adapted. Don't assume that everyone will understand or feel able to engage volunteers who don't fit with 'the norm'.



[Top 10 Tips for Inclusion in Volunteering](#)  
National Inclusion in Volunteering Group

### Managing sensitive and confidential information

New volunteers who have health challenges or face other barriers may need to share sensitive personal information. Ensure that your organisation is clear about who needs access to this information and that everyone is clear about confidentiality and boundaries.

### Support existing staff and volunteers

Help your staff and volunteers welcome and integrate new volunteers to their team, and understand that they may be nervous about doing something new. This sounds basic but is often overlooked.

### Identify appropriate roles

This may be the time for you to consider new opportunities which will appeal to a different type of volunteer, split current opportunities into smaller tasks or look to engage service users as volunteers.



### Robert

Volunteer at Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland

“My life changed when I started volunteering with Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland. I began volunteering at a really low time in my life but I began to really enjoy it and knew it was for right for me - it was the first thing to make me happy in years.”

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3

## Identify

When talking to potential volunteers be realistic and honest. Don't be afraid to ask questions about support they may need but try not to focus on barriers or limitations.



[Volunteers and Extra Support Needs](#)

VolunteerWiki

### Be prepared to adjust your selection process

Think about having more time for interviews – this will give a better chance to find out as much as possible about a potential volunteer, their strengths, interests and motivation. Or consider new ways of selection – some organisations invite potential volunteers to do 'shadow shifts' rather than interviews. Obviously, this isn't appropriate for all organisations but may suit your needs.

### Set realistic expectations

Whatever you do, ensure that you set expectations which match reality. Do you have the capacity and ability to engage a volunteer who may need additional support? If the answer is no, this doesn't necessarily mean that you can't involve the person. Can they be 'buddied' by a support worker, family member or existing volunteer? Can their role, timing or location be adjusted?

### Refer on

If you don't have a suitable opportunity, say so. Suggest an alternative organisation or signpost to your Local Volunteer Centre



[Local Volunteer Centres](#)

Volunteer Scotland



# 4

## Engage

As with all volunteers, ensure you have role descriptions, agreements and induction in place, and a programme of training if appropriate.

Templates are available at:



[Good Practice Guides and Templates](#)  
Volunteer Scotland



[VolunteerWiki Resource](#)  
Volunteer Edinburgh

### Design of your volunteering roles

Consideration should be given to how health and wellbeing benefits can be optimised, including the opportunity for social interaction, physical activity and helping others.

### Effective volunteer support system\*

Each volunteer should have a 'named person' who is their point of contact in the organisation. How a volunteer is supported will be determined by a range of factors such as the type of organisation, the nature of the volunteer task, the needs of the individual and the resources available. A good volunteer support system has the interests of the volunteer at the heart of the organisation.

### Frequency and intensity of volunteering

Volunteers need to commit a meaningful amount of time to volunteering for them to generate significant health and wellbeing benefits. This is referred to as the 'dose-response effect', whereby increasing the frequency and intensity of volunteering increases volunteers' wellbeing.

### 'Burnout'

However, too much or the wrong type of volunteering can lead to adverse impacts, to the extent that the volunteer's health and wellbeing would improve if they did less, changed roles or stopped volunteering altogether. This can relate to role strain, too many volunteering hours and emotionally challenging roles.

### Regularly review what volunteers are doing

Be mindful that volunteers may wish to change or develop the ways they are involved. Be particularly vigilant for 'role burnout' and remember that a volunteer's support needs may change during their time with you. It is therefore important to regularly review the way in which support is offered.

\*



[Supporting Volunteers](#)  
VolunteerWiki

[Supporting Your Volunteers](#)  
Volunteer Scotland



5

## Impact

Consider the impact volunteering has on the health and wellbeing of your volunteers. You should have a genuine interest in their health and wellbeing, facilitating this wherever possible through the monitoring of relevant indicators, and evaluating the contribution to volunteers' health and wellbeing.

Guidance on impact assessment and toolkits:



[So What? Volunteering Impact Assessment: Top Tips to Get You Started](#)

Scottish Volunteering Forum



[Volunteers' Health and Wellbeing Self-Appraisal Tool](#)

Volunteer Edinburgh



**Robert**

Volunteer Befriender  
at Quarriers

“When I started befriending with Quarriers I thought I could do it to help people, but I didn't know that I would gain so much more than I gave. I have a better attitude towards others, I've gained new skills and I am more confident in my approach to life's challenges.”

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6

## Resolve

### Prepare for the unexpected and be flexible

Like all things in life, things don't always go to plan. For individuals who volunteer as a way of improving their health and wellbeing, the stakes can be higher if things don't go well. For example, a setback in their volunteering could increase the risk of relapse for a person in recovery from mental illness or addictions.

### Recognise problems and act

Problem solving is a core part of every volunteer engager's role. Issues with relationships and performance regularly crop up, and these can be more difficult or sensitive for volunteers with support needs. Where possible anticipate problems and address them before they get too big.



[Volunteer Problem Solving Policy](#)  
VolunteerWiki



**Leanne**

Volunteer Befriender  
at Quarriers

“I've learned a lot about myself already. I feel that I'm on a journey; I'm very much walking alongside my young person as they move toward their goals and that's a real privilege - each day brings something new to think about and reflect upon.”

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7

## Sustain

The success of any inclusive volunteering programme is dependent on organisations doing their best to support the health and wellbeing of all staff, whether paid or voluntary.

### Tracking the health and wellbeing of your volunteers

Volunteers will thrive in an organisation where there is clarity on how they are engaged and supported. Consider drawing up a 'Wellness Action Plan' as part of your agreement and induction with the volunteer. This will identify 'warning signs' to be aware of and actions to take should the volunteer become unwell or relapse.



[Wellness Action Plan](#)  
Volunteer Edinburgh



[Protecting Your Wellbeing: Guidance for Volunteers](#)  
Befriending Networks



[Looking After Your Volunteers: The Four Principles](#)  
Befriending Networks

### Tracking the health and wellbeing of volunteer managers

Volunteer managers and coordinators must also take measures to safeguard their own health and wellbeing.

It is important that you are clear about your role and relationship with volunteers:

- Do not attempt to be an expert about your volunteers' health issues. Seek guidance from specialist agencies if needed.
- If the volunteer has a support worker ensure that they remain involved and can be contacted if problems arise.
- Be clear about your boundaries with volunteers. You may be providing a supportive volunteering experience but you are not the person's support worker or counsellor.
- Admit when you 'are in too deep' and encourage the volunteer to seek appropriate help. Many volunteer engagers report being drawn too deeply into personal issues which go beyond their ability and confidence.



8

## Recognise and celebrate

### Recognition of volunteers' contribution

People like to be recognised, thanked and appreciated for what they do, irrespective of whether this is in paid employment, formal volunteering or just helping a friend or neighbour. Recognise volunteers' contributions throughout the year and especially during Volunteers' Week.



[Volunteers' Week Team](#)

Volunteers' Week Team in Scotland

### Sharing the good news

Share the good news of the benefits of volunteering to individuals, organisations and the wider community.

Encourage volunteers to tell others how volunteering has helped their health and wellbeing.



[Inspiring Volunteer Stories](#)

Volunteer Scotland

[MyVolunteering](#)

Volunteer Edinburgh



**Steven**

Volunteer at  
Epilepsy Connections

“Since volunteering for Epilepsy Connections my skills and confidence have greatly strengthened. I have been able to present workshops and be a guest speaker at a whole range of events that I would never have thought possible before meeting the organisation. I have also made lifelong friendships within the epilepsy community that are so important to me!”

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# 9

## Moving on

### Managing the exit

Finding the right time to move on can sometimes be difficult for organisations and for individuals. It is important that volunteers' departures are planned and/or managed.

 [Volunteer Exits](#)  
VolunteerWiki

### Securing feedback

Exit interviews and questionnaires are an important way of gathering information about your volunteers' experience and about your organisation.

 [Volunteer Leaving Questionnaire](#)  
Volunteer Edinburgh

### Identifying new opportunities

If a volunteer is wishing to consider something new, direct them towards the national volunteer opportunities website or their local volunteer centre.

 [Volunteer Opportunities Search](#)  
Volunteer Scotland

 [Find Support Locally](#)  
Volunteer Scotland



**Morgan**

International volunteer

Looking towards the future, I know that volunteering will remain an important part of my life. I will go home knowing that I have the ability and the confidence to move to a new country, start from scratch, and build an incredible circle of friends while living a fulfilled and genuine life - and that is an immeasurable benefit of this experience.”

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# Acknowledgements

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## Scottish Volunteering Forum

The Scottish Volunteering Forum is a collaborative group of cross-sector organisations that are committed to developing and improving volunteer participation in Scotland. We exist to influence the strategic landscape and champion innovative approaches using our collective intelligence and expertise.

## Volunteer Edinburgh

Volunteer Edinburgh led the development of this document and have provided a wide range of resources which are hosted on its [VolunteerWiki!](#) website.

## Volunteer Scotland

Volunteer Scotland's research study [Volunteering, Health and Wellbeing: What does the evidence tell us?](#) was the catalyst for this Guide and its companion document:



[The Contribution of Volunteering to a Healthier and Happier Scotland: Influencing policy and practice in Scotland](#)  
Scottish Volunteering Forum



## Call to action

We hope this Good Practice resource has been informative and engaging. You can help us by:

- Reviewing your own organisation's performance against the nine stages
- Taking action to improve the impact of your volunteering
- Capturing the lessons learned
- Sharing this resource and your experience with others

By working together we can optimise the health and wellbeing benefits from volunteering and contribute to a healthier and happier Scotland.

**Be the Change!**