



Volunteer-led Volunteer Management Guide

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Introduction

In a museum without any paid staff volunteers are its life-blood. Such a key resource needs to be nurtured and supported. The aim of this guidance is not so much to formalise volunteering as provide a structure to help it work well.

It is meant to be aspirational. You may not have everything referred to here in place at the moment, and it could take some time to work towards achieving it all. Your resources – money, time, space – may be limited, and for now you may be following the spirit rather than the letter of this guidance. The hope is that you will aim high. There is no reason why a volunteer-led museum cannot provide its volunteers with a well-managed, supportive and worthwhile experience.

This guidance was written with the help of the Cinema Museum and the House Mill whose kind assistance is gratefully appreciated.

Health check

This health check is to help you see where you need to take action and prioritise your work. 'Must' means that you have a legal obligation to act. 'Should' means that this is considered to be core good practice.

You must:	
Include volunteers within your health and safety policy	
Carry out risk assessments	
Keep volunteer information in line with the Data Protection Act	
Insure your volunteers	
Where relevant implement a safeguarding policy	

You should:	
Have a volunteer policy and agreement	
Provide individual feedback for volunteers	
Reimburse expenses	
Implement an equal opportunities policy for volunteers	
Make reasonable adjustments for disabled volunteers	
Create role descriptions for volunteers	
Put a process in place for dealing with problems	
Recognise and appreciate volunteering	

What is the difference between volunteering and a work placement?

There can be confusion over the difference between volunteering and work experience/work placements, not to mention internships.

Volunteers would usually be recruited directly, while work experience placements come through another body such as a college or university, often as part of an academic course.

Volunteering is usually open ended, whereas work placements would have a fixed term.

Volunteers may gain valuable experience, but this is not the key aim of the activity, and volunteers will have a range of motivations, while for work placements it is the whole point of the

Volunteers generally don't like their work to feel like employment, whereas a work placement should be giving a taste of what it is like to have a job in a particular field.

Internships would tend to be along the lines of work placements, but usually created by the host organisation.

Please note that this guidance is focused on volunteer involvement only. For information on work placements see the Arts Council publication *Work Placement Toolkit For Students Universities and Arts and Cultural Organisations* www.asetonline.org/documents/LCACEToolkit.pdf

Getting started

Taking responsibility

As volunteer involvement is so crucial for a volunteer-led museum someone should take clear responsibility for it. This does not necessarily mean that the same person carries out all the tasks related to volunteering – these can be shared – simply that they are co-ordinating the work and making sure it gets done.

You might consider recruiting a volunteer specifically to co-ordinate volunteering.

Legal issues

This is just a short summary. Further information can be found in the publication *Volunteers and the Law*, available as a free download: www.volunteering.org.uk/images/stories/Volunteering-England/Documents/Publications/Volunteers_and_the_Law_rev.pdf

The legal position of volunteers is different to that of paid workers. The protections we'd expect as employees – from unfair dismissal or discrimination – do not apply to volunteers. This is because relevant employment rights legislation only covers people working under a contract.

The Equality Act protects people from discrimination in two areas – employment and access to goods or services. As we've seen, they are not employees. Some have argued that a volunteer could claim that their organisation was providing them with a service. This has not been tested and for the moment remains unlikely.

Clearly in any case you should avoid discriminating against volunteers or treating them unfairly. Even if they can't take legal action against you, your museum could be severely damaged by such disputes, and of course you have a moral duty to be fair and inclusive.

Your museum has a duty of care towards its volunteers (as well as its visitors). This means you need to take reasonable steps to prevent volunteers from coming to harm. You should carry out risk assessments and act upon them.

The duty of care also applies to children or vulnerable adults that the museum works with. If you are offering education classes or similar projects aimed at vulnerable people you should put in place adequate safeguarding procedures. Volunteers are included in the legislation governing who is allowed to be criminal record checked.

Information held on identifiable volunteers is covered by the data protection act.

Some volunteers have sought to prove that they were in fact employees and therefore claim employment rights. This is very rare, and even fewer have been successful. However it's worth being aware of the issue – such a volunteer may be entitled to the minimum wage for example. It is a complex topic, so see chapter one of *Volunteers and the Law* for further information.

Volunteer policy

A volunteer policy sets out how volunteers will be involved. It helps ensure consistency, and lets volunteers know how they will be treated.

It will also be helpful if you apply to funders for any project related to volunteer engagement.

The policy should be clear and to the point. There's no need for it to be long and complicated – you want it to be read and understood. In many cases you can summarise key points and signpost to fuller policies or procedures.

There are examples of volunteer policies available on the Volunteering England website. Do avoid simply taking one and replacing the original organisation's name with that of your museum. It has to fit your needs, and the process of thinking through the content will be helpful.

This is a typical structure, with questions to help you think decide what to include within each section. It isn't exhaustive – you may feel you need to add in other topics.

Principles and values

- Why are you involving volunteers?
- What principles underpin your volunteer involvement?

Recruitment

- How will you create volunteer roles?
- How will you find volunteers?
- What will your recruitment process look like?
- What will you do about applicants you don't think are right for the role?
- Will you take up references? Carry out criminal record checks?

Induction and training

- How will you give new volunteers the information they need to carry out their role and feel at home in the museum?
- What training will you provide?
- What ongoing training will be provided?

Support and supervision

- Who has overall responsibility for volunteer involvement?
- Will volunteers have named supervisors?
- How will volunteers be supported?

Dealing with problems

- Who will deal with volunteer problems?
- How?

Expenses

- What expenses can you reimburse?
- How?

Health and safety

- What is in place to protect volunteers?
- What do volunteers need to know?

Equal opportunities

- What do you mean by equal opportunities?
- What do volunteers need to know?

Safeguarding

- If your museum works with children (e.g. education activities) how will you keep them safe?
- What do volunteers need to know?

Volunteer agreement

Volunteer agreements set out mutual expectations. They can be helpful as they define the relationship clearly and give volunteers a good idea of where they stand. They are not intended to be legally binding.

Example Volunteer Agreement

This agreement tells you what you can expect from us, and what we hope from you. We aim to be flexible, so please let us know if you would like to make any changes and we will do our best to accommodate them.

You can expect XXXXX Museum:

- to introduce you to how the organisation works and your role in it, and to provide any training you need.
- to provide regular meetings with a Supervisor so that you can tell us if you are happy with how your tasks are organised and get feedback from us. Your Supervisor's name is [].
- to respect your skills, dignity and individual wishes and to do our best to meet them.
- to consult with you and keep you informed of possible changes.
- to insure you against injury you suffer or cause due to negligence.
- to provide a safe workplace.
- to apply our equal opportunities policy.
- to apply our problem solving procedure if there is any problem.

We expect you:

- to work reliably to the best of your ability, and to give as much warning as possible whenever you cannot work when expected
- to treat staff, volunteers and visitors with respect
- to follow our rules and procedures, including health and safety, equal opportunities and confidentiality.

Note: this agreement is in honour only and is not intended to be a legally binding contract of employment.

I have read and understood the agreement:

Volunteer:

Recruitment

Volunteer involvement is a balance between meeting your museum's needs and those of individual volunteers. You obviously have tasks that you need people to carry out, but at the same time there are motivations that lead volunteers to give up their time. It's these motivations that attract them into voluntary work in general, and choosing a role or organisation in particular.

Remember that while the core group of volunteers behind the museum may have come together because of their interest in the Museum's subject, there are several reasons why other people may choose to give up their time.

These typically include:

Needing work experience

Looking for a challenge

Wanting to feel useful

Looking for something social

Wanting to make a difference

Wanting to keep on using skills and knowledge

Learning new skills

Hoping to get into a career

Building self-confidence

Role description

A role description is the equivalent of a job description. It sets out the tasks you expect volunteers to carry out. They are useful for several reasons:

- They help you think through what exactly you want volunteers to do
- They tell potential volunteers what the role will involve
- They help set boundaries for volunteers
- They give volunteers reassurance that they won't be used as general dogsbodies

You may already have a good idea of what the volunteer role will involve. It can be useful though to think about the tasks that make it up. By thinking about tasks you may also be able to put them together to create a worthwhile role you hadn't previously considered.

Once you have written the role description you should review it bearing in mind the following questions:

How likely are we to find someone for this role? Would someone really be willing to carry it out without pay? You may be being too ambitious – perhaps the role could be split into two, or rather than one person doing it for 4 days a week you could have two doing it for 2 days.

How flexible can we be with the tasks we are asking people to carry out?

Are we asking for too much in terms of skills and previous experience? What is truly essential to carry out the role and what would simply be desirable?

Who would want to carry out the role? This may help you target recruitment. For example, a role promoting the museum might be ideal for a student on a marketing course at a local college.

What resources would the role require? Expenses? Desk space? Computer access?

When drawing up a role description there are three concepts to bear in mind.

- Realism
- Mutual needs
- Flexibility

Realism means how likely are you to get someone to carry out such a role? It's fine to have wishlists – you may be lucky enough to find a volunteer with a high level of skills or qualifications – but do consider the chances of finding such a person. Rather than wait for the right volunteer could you train and support someone to the right level? Similarly is the role too demanding for one person to carry out unpaid? Would you be more likely to find volunteers if either the role was broken down into more than one, or rather than look for one person to carry it out four or five days a week you share it among two or three volunteers?

Mutual needs – of course your main priority is to set out the tasks you need someone to do. You should also remember that someone have to want to carry out the role. Why would someone want to volunteer in this capacity? What motivations might it meet?

Flexibility – If possible try to allow for a degree of flexibility. A potential volunteer may be looking for good work experience, or something to keep them physically active. They may have a form of anxiety, and prefer to carry out the tasks that do not involve interacting with the public. If you have the capacity to change the role to better suit the individual you'll be able to take on more volunteers and more closely match their motivations.

Advertising for volunteers

You are in effect selling the opportunity to volunteer to people. When creating posters, leaflets or text for your website think about the following questions someone reading them might have:

- What?
 - What would you be asking volunteers to do? Avoid just saying 'we need volunteers' – potential volunteers need to identify with a distinct role
- Why?
 - How is the role worthwhile?
 - What would the volunteer get from the role? What motivations might it meet?
- Who?

- Who are you looking for? Are there any particular skills needed?
- Where?
 - Where is it based?
- When?
 - What time commitment is needed?

Where to advertise?

Target visitors

You have a ready-made audience of people interested in your work - your visitors. A poster or leaflet aimed at them, explaining that you are volunteer-run, and what kind of roles you have to offer

Volunteer Centres

Volunteer Centres are local organisations that act a little like a jobcentre for volunteering. Potential volunteers visit them, discuss what they are looking for, and are given a selection of roles offered by groups in the area. If you register with them your volunteer opportunities will also be uploaded to *Do-it*, the national volunteering database.

Some volunteer centres may be independent, or form part of a Council for Voluntary Service. As well as recruitment, they will usually also offer training and support for volunteer management, as well as news and updates.

Volunteering England's website has a handy volunteer centre finder:
www.volunteering.org.uk/finder

Posters/flyers

There are dozens of places to put up posters – community centres, GP surgeries, libraries, colleges, sports centres, places of worship

Think about what your poster is saying to anyone who sees it. Simply saying 'we need volunteers' will not attract too many people – few would apply to a recruitment ad asking for 'employees'. Refer to the roles you have to offer, or at least give a general idea of the tasks volunteers might carry out.

Website

Many people turn to the internet first for their information. Recruitment details should be on your website. Make it easy to find – it can be hard to track down volunteering information on many organisation's sites.

Word of mouth

One of the most powerful recruitment tools is word of mouth. In surveys, many volunteers state that they give up their time due to a link with friends or family. You can encourage this by letting current volunteers know you need more support. Having clear roles can be helpful here too, as such friends

and family may not think of themselves as museum volunteers, but be interested in a specific activity.

Targeting specific groups

You may look at a role and feel that it would be of interest to a specific group of people – students on a relevant course for example.

Another reason for targeted recruitment might be to redress an imbalance in the diversity of your volunteers.

Responding to enquiries

You should try to make sure that enquiries from potential volunteers are answered quickly. A common complaint from people interested in voluntary work is that organisations take forever to respond to them – if ever. If an enquirer doesn't hear back in good time they may have found something else to do with their time, or decide that your museum does not put a lot of priority into volunteering.

Anyone answering the phone or emails should know what to do with such requests. You could have information packs ready-made, so that an address can be taken and information sent out straight away. Such a pack might include a role description, information about the museum and, if you use them, an application form.

Application forms

It's worth thinking about whether or not you need an application form. In practice many organisations will interview virtually all respondents. The application form just adds an unnecessary extra stage to the process, and can be very off putting to some volunteers. Again, many people will only have application forms for paid work as a frame of reference.

If you do decide to use application forms make sure you are only asking for information you need at that point. You should also offer the opportunity to take information verbally where appropriate – for example, disabled people, people for whom English isn't their first language.

Interviews

The idea of an interview will be really off-putting to many people – few of us look forward to a job interview. Inviting potential volunteers in for a chat is much less intimidating. If you prefer to keep the name interview then you could describe it as an informal interview, and make it clear that it's an opportunity for the person to find out about you as much as it is for you to find out about them.

Try to ensure that you won't be disturbed during the interview.

Think through:

- Why does the person want the role?
- Do they have the skills or experience you were looking for? Can you provide support or training to make up for any skill gaps?
- Are there any particular support needs?

If the person isn't suitable for the role is there another role you could offer? At the very least signpost them to the local volunteer centre.

Supporting volunteers

Induction/Training

New volunteers have to be given the information they need both to carry out their role and feel at home within the museum. This second point is often overlooked. No one wants to feel like an outsider, and it can be quite intimidating to be a new starter in any setting - especially so if there's a tight knit group of volunteers already in place. So as well as the 'hard' information such as health and safety guidance, training for the role and so on remember the 'soft' information such as explaining how the museum is run, what the rest of the volunteers do, and where to leave bags and coats.

Do remember that for most volunteers this will be their first time working in a museum. Some may never have stepped inside a museum at all. It will be a new environment for them. Don't take too much for granted, and be careful of using jargon or acronyms. For example, many people won't know what HLF stands for or what an archivist actually does.

It can be helpful to draw up an induction checklist. This is simply a list of all the things you want to tell new volunteers. By ticking them off you can be sure that each new volunteer has received all the information they need – especially around areas where the museum has important responsibilities such as health and safety.

Buddying can be a useful additional form of support. This simply means an experienced volunteer acts as a kind of friendly face, and helps show the ropes, whether this be around the role itself or more generally.

A volunteer handbook can back up the information given during induction. A volunteer policy might explain what expenses will be reimbursed, while a handbook would explain exactly how to go about claiming them back.

Supervision

Each volunteer should have a named supervisor. This means they always know who to go to with questions – and who is responsible for setting out their tasks.

You need to find an appropriate way of giving volunteers individual support. There are different ways of providing this:

One-to-one meetings

Regular meetings allow volunteers the chance to raise issues and talk about their work and how they're getting on in general. They also allow their supervisor to find out how they're doing, and where they may need more support.

It can help to use a set format to allow volunteers to prepare and think through any issues they'd like to bring up.

- What has the volunteer been working on?
- What's gone well?
- What hasn't gone so well?
- If the volunteer has goals they want to achieve through volunteering, are they being met?
- Is there any support the volunteer needs?
- Development – is there anything the volunteer wants to do?

Group supervision

Group supervision works in some settings, and can be a useful method of both support and on-going training and development, although there is a danger that volunteers might not be completely open about their concerns or experiences.

Setting ground rules is vital – confidentiality, honesty and respect would be key principles here. Preparation by volunteers is even more important, as the individual time for each volunteer is likely to be limited. Each volunteer should have time to talk through their work using questions similar to those set out above for one-to-one meetings. The supervisor needs good facilitation skills in allowing discussion of issues that arise without them becoming overly critical, digressing from the topic, or becoming dominated by the more forceful participants.

You should be clear that individual meetings can still be arranged where there is a need for them (either for the volunteer to raise an issue or for the supervisor to raise a problem).

Informal catch up

If there is not the capacity for regular scheduled meetings informal catch-ups could be used. This could be over a coffee, or whilst sharing a task.

This would also be more appropriate for many short term or one-off roles. You wouldn't want to schedule a meeting on a Wednesday afternoon for a volunteer who was only helping out for a couple of Sundays to help replant the flower beds in front of the museum.

It's easy for such casual arrangements to slip, so make reminders for yourself to ensure you are talking to volunteers in this way.

Telephone meetings

Where volunteers aren't based in the museum (e.g. oral history collectors) telephone conversations could take the place of one-to-one meetings. It's important to keep in regular touch with such volunteers, as it's easy for the volunteer to feel cut off, and unable to see how their work fits into a wider picture.

Open door policy

This means setting aside times where an appropriate person is available to talk to volunteers about any issues that concern them. It could be used to support informal catch-ups or group supervision sessions.

Communication

As well as individual support there should be other channels of communication with volunteers. You want volunteers to feel informed and listened to. It is a practical way of showing that they are valued. It also means that you can hear complaints at an early stage, and hear suggestions for better ways of doing things.

Volunteer meetings

Volunteer meetings allow everyone to get together, talk about any issues that concern them and discuss plans for the museum. They can also be training opportunities, whether on specific issues or to help with team building.

Emails

Email can be a great way of communicating with volunteers, especially for passing on information to a large group of people at once. However do check whether or not people have access to the internet. It can cause resentment if some volunteers feel there is a two tier system operating.

Newsletters

If you involve a large number of volunteers a newsletter can be a good way of passing on information.

Noticeboard

Noticeboards can be useful, but there is a danger that they fade into the background and people stop taking notice of them

Social media

Many people use websites such as Facebook for keeping in touch with each other and organisations. If you try this make sure you monitor what is being said, and keep the group private to volunteers.

Volunteer recognition.

It's important to find ways of showing that you appreciate the work of your volunteers.

Most volunteers are happy with a 'thank you' at the end of the day, but there are other things you could consider:

Certificates

Nominating for external awards

Birthday cards

A Christmas party

Giving extra responsibility

A volunteers week celebration

Dealing with problems

In general the earlier a problem is dealt with the easier it will be to handle. Most issues can be dealt with informally. It's key to raise the problem in a way that lessens the chance that the volunteer will become defensive.

- Firstly, remember that the problem is the behaviour, not the person.
- Bring up the consequences of the behaviour.
- Allow the volunteer to put their case. It could be that there's a reason for their actions that can be dealt with – e.g. coming in late because they're now a carer, not carrying out tasks because they weren't sure how to do them properly.
- Agree steps forward. This could simply be a change in behaviour. Depending on the cause of the problem other actions could be taken – extra training, or a change in the role.
- Review the issue at a later date. Have the agreed steps been followed?

Where informal steps haven't worked it's sensible to have a procedure to follow.

Example Problem Solving Procedure

These procedures are in place to help us deal with problems fairly and consistently.

If a volunteer has a complaint about the Museum or another volunteer:

We hope that most problems can be solved informally. But if this is not the case the volunteer should raise the matter formally with their supervisor.

If the complaint is against the supervisor, then the volunteer should request a meeting with [*an appropriate person*].

If the issue is not resolved then it should be put in writing to [*the same person as above*]. The matter should be dealt with within 14 days.

If there is a problem with a volunteer's behaviour:

Again, hopefully this can be resolved informally. Many 'problems' are simply due to training needs, a lack of support, inappropriate roles and so on. Where informal measures are not enough the volunteer's supervisor will raise the issue in a formal meeting with the volunteer. The volunteer will be entitled to put their case. If it is felt necessary an informal warning may be issued, with steps agreed to improve conduct.

If the issue is still not resolved a meeting involving the volunteer, volunteer's supervisor and [*whoever the appropriate person is*] will be called. This may result in a formal warning, with the understanding that following another warning the volunteer will be asked to leave.

If a volunteer is believed to have behaved in a manner that has or could have seriously affected the Museum – for example theft, bullying, or violence – they will be immediately suspended while the matter is investigated by [*an appropriate person/persons*]. The volunteer will be able to put their case, and a decision will be made within 14 days. If the complaint against the volunteer is upheld they will be excluded from volunteering.

In all cases volunteers have the right to be accompanied at meetings on these issues by another volunteer or friend.

Volunteers have the right to appeal decisions. Appeals will be heard by

Safety

Health and Safety Policy

Although by law as an organisation with less than 5 employees your museum does not have to have a health and safety policy in place it does make sense to have something along these lines given that you have a responsibility towards your visitors as well as your volunteers. The policy does not need to be complicated. It should set out who is responsible for various areas of health and safety, what these areas are and what measures have been put in place.

A health and safety policy and risk assessments will also help satisfy insurers that you are meeting your responsibilities.

Insurance

Volunteers are usually insured under employer's liability insurance. As a volunteer-led museum your insurers may choose to cover your volunteers under the public liability insurance.

Always inform your insurer if you are taking on new activities or substantially changing your current ones. An example might be involving younger volunteers - your insurance cover may not currently cover under 16s.

Risk assessments

As with the health and safety policy a museum without paid staff does not need to carry out risk assessments by law, but despite this you should be using them.

Risk assessments fulfil two key functions. Firstly, they act as evidence to show that you have taken your duty of care seriously. Secondly, they are a tool. Risk assessment is a process to follow to help you systematically look at potential areas of risk, and take steps to make things safer.

The Health and Safety Executive provide a lot of guidance on the risk assessment process
<http://www.hse.gov.uk/risk/index.htm>

It can help to have more than one pair of eyes looking at it.

Review the risk assessment. It makes sense to look over it annually, but if anything changes about the activity, such as the involvement of young people as volunteers, it should also be looked at again.

Once the activity is underway double check the risk assessment, and ask the volunteers carrying out the task for their thoughts on it – potential hazards or the levels of risk may need to be re-addressed in light of experience.

Lost children procedure

If your museum is large enough for children to become accidentally separated from their parents you should have a procedure in place for dealing with lost children. There should be a nominated place to take them to. This would normally be the reception desk. It should be somewhere obvious and publically visible to avoid a child being alone out of sight with a volunteer.

Safeguarding

If you are working with children or vulnerable adults –through education activities for example – then you should put in place adequate measures to keep them safe. This section is just a summary of key points. You should seek further guidance. MLA produced information in conjunction with the NSPCC. It is available here:

www.mla.gov.uk/what/~media/Files/pdf/2008/Safeguarding_v5_Updated_2.ashx

Safeguarding Policy

Such a policy should set out how you will protect vulnerable people, and who will take responsibility for seeing this is done.

Reporting procedure

There should be a procedure in place for volunteers to report concerns, and ensure that they are dealt with correctly. Again, the MLA guidance discusses this.

Code of conduct

It would be sensible to give volunteers clear guidelines on behaviour around children. The National Museum of Wales has a useful code of conduct for volunteers: www.museumwales.ac.uk/en/346/

Criminal record checks

Criminal record checks can be an important safeguard, but it is dangerous to over rely on them – they can only show you that someone has been caught before.

Criminal record checks – ‘disclosures’ - for people working with children or vulnerable adults are available from the Disclosure and Barring Service. You cannot obtain a DBS disclosure for volunteers simply on the grounds that children will be among the visitors. The full lists of roles that can be checked are quite detailed, and should be consulted before you apply for a check. There are two categories of such roles:

‘Regulated activities’: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/crime/disclosure-and-barring/leaflet-england-wales?view=Binary

‘Eligible roles’: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/agencies-public-bodies/dbs/dbs-checking-service-guidance/eligibility-guidance?view=Binary

See below for information on taking on volunteers with criminal convictions.

Specific issues

Data protection

The information you hold on volunteers must be kept in line with the Data Protection Act. The Act covers information held on identifiable living people in any form of retrievable filing system. There is a good overview of data protection for small voluntary groups available at www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/fileadmin/ICT/pdf/lcgdp.pdf

Some key points to bear in mind when handling volunteers' information:

- Only ask volunteers for information that you actually need.
- When volunteers give you information they are giving implicit consent for you to use it. But this only applies for uses they would reasonably expect. If you wished to use that information for reasons not related to volunteering, and that volunteers wouldn't have expected, then you need to get clear consent from them. This could be a tick box on the volunteer application/registration form explaining what else will be done with their details and allowing them to agree to this.
- Volunteer information should be kept securely. Access should be restricted to those people with a direct work related need for it. Paper files should be kept in a lockable filing cabinet or desk drawer, and information on computer protected by a password. Care should be taken when transporting information – laptops and memory sticks can be easily lost or stolen. Even disposal of information should be secure – paper files shredded

Volunteer expenses

If you can afford to reimburse volunteer expenses it makes it easier for many more people to volunteer.

Expenses payments should be a direct reimbursement of actual costs. 'Flat rate' expenses (e.g. £5 a day regardless of how much the volunteer has spent) would be seen as income. This would affect benefits, could be taxable, and may even contribute to creating an employment relationship with volunteers.

The one exception to this would be petrol expenses. The HMRC 'approved mileage rate' is the generally accepted maximum rate, and is currently set at 45p per mile.

It is perfectly reasonable to set an upper limit on lunch expenses, or to reimburse travel up to a certain train fare.

Benefits claimants

Benefit claimants are fully entitled to volunteer. It must be unpaid, other than for the reimbursement of out of pocket expenses.

The fact that a person on a disability benefit such as Incapacity Benefit or Employment Support Allowance volunteers should not be used as evidence that they are therefore fit for work.

Volunteers should inform the jobcentre that they are volunteering.

Volunteers are sometimes told that they are not allowed to volunteer for more than 16 hours per week. At present this is untrue. There is no hour limit on any benefit. However a limit may be imposed on some volunteers when 'universal credits' are introduced in 2013.

If your volunteers face any problems with the Jobcentre you should contact your local volunteer centre for support.

Older volunteers

There is no retirement age for volunteers. There should not be an upper age limit on your insurance, but do check your policy. The main considerations would be whether an individual is capable of carrying out the role, and whether it would be safe for them to do so. If it is reasonable to do so you might consider changing the volunteer's role in order to continue to engage them.

Younger volunteers

There is no minimum age for volunteering. However, there are a number of issues to think about when taking on younger people.

Firstly, you should seek parental consent for under 16s.

You should consider the suitability of the role. Does it involve too much responsibility for a young person? Bear in mind that younger people may have less confidence, knowledge or skills. It may be that where the role is normally carried out by one person on their own a younger volunteer is always paired up with another volunteer.

Your risk assessments should be revisited. As with the overall suitability of the role, a lack of maturity, life experience and so on may mean that you need to put in place extra safeguards such as more or different training or closer supervision.

Volunteers with criminal convictions

Having a criminal record should not be a barrier to volunteering. Around a third of men have a criminal conviction, so a blanket policy against ex-offenders would be counter-productive for recruitment.

If a volunteer discloses a criminal record you should make an objective assessment as to whether it is relevant. Questions to ask yourself include:

- What is the nature of the offence?
- How long ago was the last offence?
- Is there a pattern of offending?
- What is the person's attitude to their conviction?
- Where there specific circumstances related to the offending? For example, a period of homelessness.

One of the conditions of accessing criminal record checks is that you have a statement on equal opportunities for ex-offenders.