

Volunteering

Introduction

Unfortunately, in a changed – and still changing – Ireland, maybe some kinds of selfless endeavour aren't as valued or supported as they should be. Volunteerism remains a core part of youth work in Ireland. In fact, the history of Irish youth work was founded on volunteerism where concerned adults gave their time, skills and energy towards the development of young people. Without volunteers, youth work as we know it would not have developed into being the effective and transforming force it is today.

In modern Ireland the role of the volunteer is still crucial within youth work. It needs to be respected, supported and shown sensitive and excellent governance. Individuals undertake voluntary work by choice and it is unpaid. The challenges in supporting, encouraging and demonstrating good leadership for volunteers is very different to meeting the needs and responsibilities of paid staff. There should be clear guidelines and protocols both for the volunteer and for the professional colleague working alongside them. Therefore, it is essential that you develop a volunteer policy for your youth project/service.

Things to think about

When creating a policy in this area, the following questions are designed to get you thinking. They do not cover everything but should help to get you started.

Planning

- Who should be involved in the process of developing and writing this policy?
- What roles do you see volunteers undertaking in your youth project/service?
- What supports do you think they will need?
- What engagement process do you have to operate before someone can work voluntarily e.g. garda vet, references, interviews?
- What training will you offer your volunteers?
- What mutual understanding do you need between your paid staff and volunteers in your youth project/service?
- How will you agree the relationships and roles between the youth project/service and the volunteer e.g. a job/role description?
- How are volunteers involved in the planning and development of your youth project/service?
- How will you recruit people to volunteer and match their skills, abilities and interests to the needs of the youth project/service?
- Will your youth project/service develop and support junior leadership programmes to enable young people to contribute on a voluntary basis?
- How are volunteers supervised?
- How will volunteers be covered by the insurance of the youth project/service?
- How will you train your volunteers in child protection and welfare?
- Have you considered the health and safety implications of engaging volunteers?

Volunteering

- How will you induct volunteers into your youth project/service?
- How will you value and acknowledge the contribution of volunteers?
- How will you ensure that volunteers understand and maintain confidentiality in relation to the work of your youth project/service?
- How will volunteers access relevant and appropriate information to assist them in undertaking their role and tasks?
- How can your youth project/service ensure that information is managed in a professional manner?
- What complaints procedures are in place in relation to the work of volunteers?
- Do you have a budget particularly for volunteers e.g. training opportunities, out of pocket expenses?
- How will your youth project/service support the progression of young people who are interested in volunteering?
- If volunteers show interest in youth work as a career how will you encourage and support them?
- How will your youth project/service encourage volunteers to remain involved and committed?

Review

- How will youth workers and other staff be made aware of this policy?
- When and how will you review the policy?
- Do you need to consider the consequences if volunteers and or other staff fail to follow the agreed policy?

Key things to ensure

- That volunteering is not viewed as a substitution to paid work
- Adequate investment in supporting volunteering
- An over reliance on the commitment, time and good will of volunteers
- That paid youth workers and other staff value the role and contribution of volunteers

Relevant legislation/guidelines

In designing any policy, it is important to be aware of the wider context in which your youth project/ service exists. In many cases, how you have to act is dictated or influenced by the law:

- Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children, Department of Health and Children, 1999
- Code of Good Practice, Child Protection for the Youth Work Sector, 2nd Edition May 2003
Department of Education and Science
- Youth Work Act 2001
- “Our Duty to Care”, Department of Health and Children, 2002
- Equal Status Act 2000
- Employment Equality Act 1998 and 2004

Where else to get information and resources

A good policy keeps up to date with current practice, trends and legislation. Your policy should be a living document which directs and underpins the work you do and how it is done. Policy development takes time and effort but the return is worth the investment. There are a range of information sources and resources available to help you. Here are a few to get you started.

- Volunteer Bureaux locally.
- www.volunteeringireland.com .
- www.idealists.com
- www.irelandcares.com
- The National Youth Council of Ireland resource lists at www.youth.ie

A policy on Volunteering might use the following structure

- 1. A COVER PAGE.** This should include: the name of your youth project/service; the title of the policy; when it comes into force; the person(s) responsible for signing it off; and a date for reviewing it.
- 2. A POLICY STATEMENT.** This should state clearly, but in broad terms, what you want the volunteer policy to cover. It is a statement of intent and vision, saying what your youth project/service believes. It can be quite short and need not go into all the practical details; these are covered by the sections below.
- 3. REASONS FOR THE POLICY.** This section should give, in clear bullet points, your reasons for creating this policy. Ask yourself questions such as: “Why is such a policy helpful?” and “What concerns would arise if we did not have a policy?” There are some practical reasons for having a policy like this, while other reasons may reflect values that are important to the youth project/service. All these reasons should be listed: they will help all those who are required to comply with the policy to understand its importance and accept it.
- 4. THOSE WHO MUST COMPLY WITH THIS POLICY.** This section could again be bullet-pointed, listing all those who you expect to follow the policy. They might include, for example, the project leader, youth workers, volunteers, students.
- 5. IMPLEMENTATION.** This will be the largest section of the document, setting out the practical details of how you intend to put the policy into practice. It states who is responsible for what, and how, in practical terms, you intend the policy to be carried out. It might name the tasks for which various people are responsible e.g. the youth worker will be responsible for organising volunteer support meetings. See the section on ‘Things to think about’ above for some more prompts.
- 6. LINKS TO OTHER POLICY AREAS.** This section should list the other policies of your youth project/service that link into your volunteer policy. Links to other policy areas, such as your child protection and welfare policy, should be identified in this section. All your policies must interconnect; otherwise the vision for your youth project/service may become confused and pull people in different directions.