

# Working with volunteers

Community groups are almost always made up of volunteers. The success of any project or scheme is reliant on the human resources available to manage, promote and deliver, and therefore recruiting enough motivated people to carry out the work is vital. You will need to find people with a range of expertise, skills, experience and relevant contacts to have the best chance of success. This guide provides some detail on how to recruit and manage volunteers for an energy efficiency project.

## Developing volunteer roles

Before you start trying to recruit volunteers you need to spend some time thinking carefully about the types of things that volunteers are going to be doing. Sometimes this will be self evident as you have already identified a very specific task that needs doing (e.g. keeping accounts of donations or helping out at an event on a specific day). However, often you will have a project that you want help with (e.g. promoting grants to local residents) and this needs to be broken down into individual activities. Potential volunteers will want to know what is needed before putting themselves forwards, and you need to identify what skills your volunteers will need and the type of time commitments required.

Volunteer roles will fall into four broad categories:

1. Core member roles
2. Ongoing requirements
3. Short-term projects
4. One-off activities

1. **Core member roles:** These are the people who make the strategic decisions for the group. The group won't exist without them and many will have been involved with the group from the start. Even long term established groups will occasionally need to recruit new volunteers to this core group to replace members who are moving on or to add extra capacity and skills.

2. **Ongoing requirements:** These roles will overlap and may well be undertaken by your core group together with other volunteers who are not actively involved in decision making. Activities that would fall into this category include:

- Finances and funding e.g. keeping track of bank balances, maintaining accounts, regular fundraising
- Communications e.g. writing a regular newsletter, developing or maintaining a website, giving talks about the group
- Co-ordination e.g. organising, running and recording meetings, keeping contact lists up to date, sending email, texts and making phone calls to group members

3. **Short-term projects:** These are activities that have an identifiable start and finish; they could last for a couple of weeks or a couple of years. While ongoing requirements usually need a small amount of time on a regular basis, a short-term project may require intensive input over a couple of weeks or months e.g. developing a new website, planning and managing a big event, promoting and delivering home energy audits.

continued ...

4. **One-off activities:** These are activities that only require a small, one-off time commitment e.g. writing a fact sheet, manning a stall at an event, delivering flyers, making a one-off funding application.

## Types of volunteering

It is important not to confuse the role with the individual volunteer. For example, you may have a dedicated volunteer who does the monthly accounts on an ongoing basis, manages a short-term project and does the odd funding application. Some types of volunteering are detailed below:

**Long term volunteers:** Will undertake all types of roles and will expect to give their time on a regular basis over a long period of time. They may have a regular ongoing role or may perform a succession of different roles as they are needed.

**Time intensive volunteers:** These are often student placements and internships but also include secondments. Volunteers give a substantial amount of time, up to 5 days a week, for a predetermined period from a week to up to a year.

**One-off volunteers:** These volunteers only commit for a specific event or a short period of time to undertake a particular activity. Volunteers are not necessarily looking to make a commitment to an organisation. One-off volunteers are often found helping at events, holiday volunteering e.g. spending a week refurbishing a community building, or a team of volunteers from a business looking for team building opportunities while helping a good cause.

**Microvolunteering:** This is often overlooked as an opportunity, but for people who are unable to commit time on a regular basis, short pieces of volunteer work may appeal and could help your group to run a project. e.g. you may have a short-term role compiling research on local businesses which is undertaken by several different volunteers just giving two hours each; they may even be doing it collaboratively online. These websites can be used to promote microvolunteering opportunities:

[www.helpfromhome.org](http://www.helpfromhome.org) [www.orange.co.uk/dosomegood](http://www.orange.co.uk/dosomegood)

**Corporate volunteers:** Many commercial organisations encourage their staff to volunteer and some organisations even give an annual allowance of paid days. In addition to team activities, corporate volunteers offer the opportunity for highly skilled individuals to work on your projects.

## Volunteer motivations

Before you rush to engage more volunteers in your energy efficiency project, it is a good idea to spend some time thinking about the reasons potential volunteers might have for getting involved. These are not necessarily the same reasons you got involved in the project. Different people will have different, and probably more than one motivation for volunteering and you should be clear about which expectations you can and cannot meet.

- **Social motivations:** Meeting people and having fun. Some volunteers will just be looking for a reason to get out of the house but others may be actively looking for opportunities to make new friends. What type of social interactions will you be offering?

continued ...

- **Improving employment prospects:** Some volunteers will be looking for an opportunity to show prospective employers that they have experience in energy efficiency or more generally the environmental sector. Others however may be looking for an opportunity to learn specific new skills or prove to an employer that they are reliable. Think about how much training and support you can offer? Would you be able to provide a written reference if asked? If someone only volunteers for a couple of months and then leaves when they get a job does it matter?
- **Building self confidence:** This can overlap with social and employment motivations as volunteers want to feel that they have friends, have worthwhile skills or have learnt new skills. Remember that many very capable people, who will make very valuable volunteers, may lack self confidence. Are you able to give individual feedback on work done? Are you able to spend plenty of time making people feel comfortable and explaining what needs to be done?
- **Altruistic motivations:** Volunteers want to feel good about themselves and are attracted to improving energy efficiency and/or reducing fuel poverty and/or community cohesion as a good cause and something that they think is important. Volunteers will want to see that they are making a difference - are you able to feed back about the changes that your projects achieve?
- **A passion:** Energy efficiency is very important to them. These volunteers have altruistic motivations but their belief in the need for reducing energy use means that they will maintain their motivation for action even if it seems little or no progress is being made. This probably applies to your group's core members. What will happen if you have volunteers whose passion is not quite the same as the rest of the group? Will this cause friction or can you accommodate a difference of opinion?

## Recruiting volunteers

Write a short brief that can be used in any advertisement and be circulated to existing volunteers. Include a short description about your organisation, details of the volunteer role, the type of volunteering opportunity and the time commitment you need - if you can be flexible say so. Think about what motivates volunteers and make sure that the brief makes it clear what you can and cannot offer and the skills required. For example:

"We are looking for an experienced bookkeeper/accountant who can work independently to maintain the group's accounts. It is expected that this work will be done remotely, from home. A time commitment is required of approximately 2 hours a month and a 2 hour meeting with the committee once every three months. We are looking for a minimum commitment of at least six months if possible."

"We are looking for volunteers to help with our energy group activities, including people to help run a monthly stall at the farmers market. No experience required but a friendly approach and a basic understanding of energy saving would be useful. We can offer training."

You may want to tweak your brief to appeal to the audience you are likely to reach - consider presenting the good cause in different ways, such as energy efficiency and climate change for environmental groups or reducing energy bills and fuel poverty for those interested in social justice and community resilience.

continued ...

Make it easy for those interested in volunteering to get in contact by including an e-mail address and a phone number. Potential volunteers will appreciate having an informal chat before being asked to complete lots of paperwork or commit their time to a meeting. Consider having someone within the existing group take a role as the volunteer co-ordinator to deal with applications and ensure new volunteers feel welcome and valued.

## Publicising the opportunity

How you publicise the opportunity will depend on what the role is, how urgent it is, and how many volunteers you need to recruit. For instance, if you are looking for new core members you may want to make approaches to identified individuals (to ensure that they identify with the group's objectives or to secure key skills) before you advertise generally. Or if you have secured some project funding that has to be spent within three months you probably need to promote everywhere as soon as possible.

Start by promoting via your existing volunteers and contacts, on your own website or newsletter and in local publications. Also try circulating details to other local community groups for them to distribute to their contacts and post on their websites. Don't worry about pinching other organisations' volunteers, the old adage is true: 'if you want something done, ask a busy person'. The most active volunteers often volunteer for three or four organisations at one time.

There are plenty of places you can advertise your volunteer vacancy and in most cases this will be free:

- Your library or community centre
- Local shops and offices
- Volunteer fairs and local events
- Universities and colleges co-ordinating student volunteer placements
- Local employers running Corporate Social Responsibility programmes that include staff volunteer days
- Environmental organisations and networks - for example local energy networks, environmental group or your closest Transition group
- Third sector support organisations such as: <http://jobs.thirdsector.co.uk> or [www.socialenterprise.org.uk/jobs](http://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/jobs)
- Volunteering umbrella organisations such as: Do It [www.do-it.org.uk](http://www.do-it.org.uk) or Volunteering England [www.volunteering.org.uk](http://www.volunteering.org.uk)
- Job sites that include volunteer vacancies: [www.environmentjob.co.uk/jobs](http://www.environmentjob.co.uk/jobs) or [www.gumtree.com](http://www.gumtree.com) or [www.guardian.co.uk/recruiters/online-templates](http://www.guardian.co.uk/recruiters/online-templates)

If you are looking for a professional to do a very specific task there may be experts in your community willing to help a local cause by offering pro bono support. If you can't find anyone local, there are a number of web-based services which co-ordinate professional volunteers, for example [www.prohelp.org.uk](http://www.prohelp.org.uk)

## Keeping volunteers engaged

Each volunteer and volunteering opportunity will be different but there are some basics to remember:

1. Make sure you know what motivates each individual and what they hope to gain from volunteering. Meet with volunteers individually from time to time and check that they are still motivated and that the experience is meeting their expectations.

continued ...

2. Give feedback to individuals about the work they do, what the project has achieved, and the individual contribution they have made.
3. Celebrate successes.
4. Listen to ideas that volunteers may have.
5. ASK don't demand!
6. If volunteers don't meet each other that often while they are volunteering organise regular meetings so they can share experiences.
7. Say THANK YOU!

### **Some general tips on...**

**Application forms:** Lengthy application forms can put people off applying for volunteer positions. Unless you are looking for someone with very specific skills for a high profile project, or you are expecting a lot of applications and want to reduce the number of people going for the opportunity, you might want to avoid formal application forms altogether.

**References:** Not essential but if you are recruiting someone unknown to the group you may want to ask for a reference to check they are who they say they are, especially if they will be handling money or visiting people's homes. There are new, less rigorous requirements for CRB checks, which are now called DBS checks.

**Confidentiality:** If volunteers will have access to information about individuals make sure that they know that this is confidential. A simple statement that requires them to sign to say that they have read it will reinforce the point.

**Health and safety and insurance:** If you are doing new things you may need to think about Health and Safety risk assessments. You may also need to get insurance for the first time or upgrade your cover. What would happen if a volunteer was badly bitten by a dog or broke a leg when visiting a home? What about if a volunteer accidentally breaks something in a client's home and they haven't got any insurance?

**Volunteers not workers:** Remember that your volunteers are not employees - so don't treat them as if they are.

### **Useful links**

This PlanLoCaL guidance on managing a project gives some useful tips on project set up and volunteer roles: [www.planlocal.org.uk/downloads/download\\_file/58](http://www.planlocal.org.uk/downloads/download_file/58)

The National Council for Voluntary Associations has good guidance on managing volunteers: <http://bit.ly/11bMagd>