

Involving Volunteers Best Practice Guide Sheet

Involving Service Users as Volunteers

The question “*Can service users be volunteers?*” often raises concerns; *is it too risky? Will they be harder to manage? Will they bring additional challenges?* However, these are the same questions that could apply to any potential volunteer.

Involving service users as volunteers requires a shift in perspective – from viewing them solely as recipients of care to recognising their potential as contributors. While there may be unique challenges, there are valuable opportunities for both the organisation and the individual.

Benefits of involving service users

The benefits of volunteering apply to anyone volunteering, but for service users it can be particularly meaningful including:

- A stepping-stone into volunteering within a familiar, safe and supportive environment
- More inclusive services, broadening representation and reflecting those accessing your services and community
- Building stronger relationships and encouraging positive engagement between staff, volunteers and service users
- Increase in skilled and passionate volunteers through lived experience, bringing a different understanding and commitment
- Giving something back and contributing to an organisation that has supported them
- Offering valuable role models with similar experiences to other service users, bringing motivation and encouragement to others

Planning

Before involving service users as volunteers, think about:

- Why are you involving service users? What will they gain?
- Do you need to amend or add in any policies or procedures?
- Involving staff, volunteers and service users in your plans and decision making within a safe and non-judgmental space; sharing any concerns, are there any issues identified
- Have you identified suitable roles/activities?
- Can you offer roles/activities that can be adapted and offer flexibility?
- Do you need to update your risk assessments?
- Are any adjustments/extra support needed?
- What support, training, supervision and development will be in place?
- Is there a budget? Can you reimburse expenses?
- How is the role different from a paid role? To make sure it's not replacing a paid role.

How to involve service users

The processes for involving service users as volunteers mirror involving volunteers good practice including management and recruitment. However, when a service user volunteers, their relationship with the organisation shifts - as it's a role with different responsibilities, expectations, support structures and requirements. Additional considerations may include:

- A clear role description/role outline – even a brief outline helps sets expectations.
- Support with boundaries and confidentiality – service users may know others using the service, have past relationships with staff and volunteers and/or still accessing your services. Clear guidance and policies, induction, training and support can help prevent issues and/or put things in place to deal with potential issues.
- Involving service users who already volunteer can provide insights, this can include those from other services or organisations sharing their experiences

- Regularly reviewing how things are going - ensuring the experience fulfilling for all
- Are you going to have a time period in place before service users become volunteers?
While no standard timeframe exists, each organisation should establish a fair and consistent approach if they are considering this.

