

Local Involvement Networks Working with Volunteers



About this guide

This guide is part of a series aimed at helping make LINKs successful. The guide has been developed in collaboration with *Volunteering England*, an independent voluntary agency committed to supporting, enabling and celebrating volunteering in all its diversity. The guide is designed to help Local Authorities, Host organisations and people involved in LINKs to work effectively with volunteers and local communities.

Background

LINKs are being set up to give communities a stronger voice in how their health and social care services are delivered. Run by local people and groups, the role of a LINK is to find out what people like and dislike about local services, monitor the care they provide and use their powers to hold services to account.

Key points

- ‘Volunteering’ is spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit other people. In the context of LINKs, this relates to working to provide a stronger voice in health and social care.
- Existing networks of local volunteers can be a starting point for an initial drive to get people involved in LINKs.
- A clear understanding of the remit of volunteers is important.
- ‘Role descriptions’ that reflect people’s abilities and capabilities can clarify expectations.
- An agreement, setting out ‘expectations’ rather than ‘obligations’, can strengthen the bond between LINKs and volunteers.
- A volunteer policy demonstrates a consistent commitment to volunteers.
- Your policy framework for volunteer involvement needs to be clear, consistent and encourage good practice – consider including equal opportunities and diversity; selection; induction training; recognition and reward; support and supervision; insurance; health and safety, CRB checks; and problem-solving procedures.

What is volunteering?

Volunteering involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit people and/or the environment. There is a long history of volunteering in health and social care. Here, we are talking about individuals investing time and energy helping to set up LINKs and getting involved in their activities. People who are thinking about getting involved with LINKs or people who are planning how to best include volunteers in LINK activities are reminded that the objectives for LINKs are to:

- give everyone the chance to say what they think about their local care services;
- give people the chance to check how care services are planned and run; and
- feed back what people have said about services so that things can change for the better.

LINK powers are to:

- get a reply to requests for information or to reports and recommendations;
- enter and view premises where publicly funded care is being provided; and
- refer issues to overview and scrutiny committees and get a response.

Finding out what is already happening

There are already volunteers working in local communities – individuals, formal or informal groups and organisations. These are an obvious starting point for an initial drive to get people involved in LINKs. Their experience can be an important part of planning to maximise continuity and ensuring that LINKs ‘get going’ as effectively as possible. A good starting point is to ‘map’ all the work that is already taking place in the area. Local Authorities and Host organisations should be able to help with this. Local groups and organisations may already have policies and procedures for volunteering that can be adapted to suit LINKs.

However, volunteers may have different motivations or aims. For example, people already working with groups and organisations may see themselves as representing their collective interests. The NHS Centre for Involvement (NCI) has published a guide about LINK governance that may help people to think about how to balance the diversity of interests that may exist across LINKs (Guide No. 12 in this series).

A volunteer policy

Having a clear ‘volunteer policy’ is a good way to demonstrate a commitment to volunteers. It also helps potential volunteers understand expectations around acting on behalf of LINKs. Many local voluntary groups and organisations have experience that LINKs can learn from and Host organisations will have the skills to help LINKs develop good practice.

Setting the volunteer policy framework

Your policy framework for volunteer involvement needs to be clear, consistent and encourage good practice. You may want to recognise the importance of volunteers to the work of LINKs and encourage people to get involved. It's important to make sure there's a clear understanding of the remit of volunteers. Also, you may want to detail the 'nuts and bolts' of volunteer involvement so that everyone understands what procedures exist and how they should be followed.

LINKs provide opportunities for lots of people to get involved in many different ways and a 'volunteering framework' for LINKs needs to reflect the broad range of roles and activities that are needed for LINKs to be successful.

Volunteer agreement

An agreement, setting out mutual expectations, rather than obligations, can strengthen the bond between volunteers and LINKs – although it's important to make clear that the agreement is not a binding legal contract of employment. Also, it could be a good idea to set out examples of what might be considered to be inappropriate conduct and ways that it will be tackled. Your volunteer agreement should be discussed with new volunteers as part of their induction. Volunteers will be acting on behalf of LINKs so it's important that they understand what these documents mean.

The NCI and the Department of Health will be publishing a Code of Conduct about the 'enter and view' powers of LINKs.

Volunteer roles

There are lots of ways that people can get involved with LINKs – from investing time to help set up and make decisions about how LINKs are run, to contributing views about a single health and social care issue. A role description can set out what tasks a volunteer will do, outline what support and training they will receive and clarify expectations – these descriptions can be flexible and reflect people's abilities and capabilities. Volunteering roles can offer rewarding opportunities, a chance to meet new people and develop new skills. But roles that are de-motivating (for example tasks that are menial or repetitive) won't keep people involved or engaged for long.

Equal opportunities and diversity

Volunteering can be an excellent way of bringing people together, whatever their background or culture. A clear equal opportunities and diversity statement removes any concerns that volunteers may have about discrimination. It's important to remember that your whole volunteer programme should be drafted with principles of equal opportunity and diversity in mind, so that these themes are reflected throughout.

Induction

A well structured induction programme ensures that volunteers are informed of the tasks expected, prepares them for their role, gives them an understanding of LINKs activities and allows them to voice any doubts or concerns. Volunteers could have an induction appropriate to their level of involvement. An induction checklist could be used to be sure that volunteers get a good range of information. A volunteer handbook, or induction pack, could be produced as a reference guide.

Support and supervision

Preparation and support makes people feel valued, and is critical to successfully involving volunteers. It's important to explain the levels of support LINKs could provide to volunteers. Also, identify the skills required from volunteers. So carry out a skills audit to identify any gaps, and think through how to address any skills shortages.

LINK volunteers may also need more specialist training or briefings on specific health and social care issues – which other people involved in LINKs may be able to provide. On the other hand, volunteers should not receive training which isn't directly relevant to their role.

Expenses

LINKs need to decide very early on whether they will have an expenses policy for people taking part in LINK activities. Although it's not about financial gain, volunteers shouldn't be financially worse off because of their work with LINKs. It is good practice for volunteers' out-of-pocket expenses to be met. This is because expenses (or the time taken to recover expenses) can pose a barrier to potential volunteers (particularly those on low incomes for whom 'cash flow' might be an issue) so having a good expenses policy can be part of LINKs' commitment to providing equal opportunities.

However, it's very important to be clear about the kind of expenses that might be met, and how expenses may be reimbursed. If reimbursed, expenses should be claimed from receipts, such as public transport tickets. Where volunteers use their own vehicles, it's important to have a consistent mileage rate, and to remain within the tax-free limits set by HM Revenue and Customs. It's not advisable to 'round up' expenses to more than the actual out-of-pocket cost, because any extra money can be classed as earnings and as such can affect state benefits and be subject to tax. It can also potentially affect the employment status of volunteers, making them entitled to the National Minimum Wage and other employment rights.

Experience from the former Commission for Patient and Public Involvement in Health was that expenses varied widely. Many Forum members claimed nothing at all but some made regular, substantial claims. The Commission recognised that the range of refundable expenses should reflect real life needs, from travel costs to employing carers either to assist relatives at home or to help someone take part in a meeting. LINKs, with their potential to involve a broad range of people in a variety of activities, need to decide how to make sure that people are not excluded from their activities because of cost. LINKs are particularly encouraged to reach out to people and groups that have not been 'involved' previously and need to think about whether cost might be a barrier for them.

Many local groups and organisations will have experience that LINKs can learn from. The Department of Health has published national good practice guidance which sets out its principles for paying and reimbursing service users and volunteers for their involvement in service improvement activities in health and social care:

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4138523.

Getting people involved

LINks need to reflect the diversity of local communities, so try to make sure that publicity materials reflect that diversity. Avoid simply 'asking for volunteers'. Set out what opportunities there are for different roles, what they involve, what people might get out of their experience, and who they can contact for more information (this is likely to be the Host organisation or Local Authority).

Traditional places to promote involvement include: events, colleges and universities, local media, posters and leaflets, local volunteer centres, doctors' surgeries, places of worship, etc. A longer list of ideas can be found at:

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/Resources/goodpracticebank/Core+Themes/equalopportunitiesdiversity/diversity-overview.htm#where>. The NCI has published a guide to 'making people aware of LINks' (Guide No. 8 in this series).

LINks will need to think creatively and innovatively about how to make it easy for people to get involved. It should be easy for people to get in touch, so make sure that contact details for the LINk are clear. People's involvement with LINks may come through existing connections with local groups and organisations.

LINks will provide many different ways for people to get involved. Some involvement activities may require potential volunteers to have interviews before being selected (for example this may be part of the procedure adopted by LINks for authorising people to 'enter and view' premises where services are provided). For some roles, it can be good practice to have an introductory period of about one month. This gives people a chance to try out their role, change task or location, or even back out without losing face.

Whatever the role, it is important to be clear how people might contribute. Prepare an information checklist about LINk activities, expectations of volunteers, commitment needed for the role, available resources, training and support.

Solving problems

Regulations stipulate that one of the procedures that LINks must agree and publicise is around dealing with complaints. Whether it is volunteers with problems, or problems with volunteers - try to discuss complaints informally at first. If the issue is not resolved or continues to cause concern, it should be dealt with in a structured way where both sides can explain their point of view. Writing a problem solving procedure for LINks will help deal with problems and complaints in a consistent manner and help people involved with LINks and stakeholders to know what to expect.

The legal position of volunteering

The legal position of volunteers is sometimes not a straightforward issue. Volunteers aren't included in most legislation around the workplace and don't have access to employment rights – such as the right not to be unfairly dismissed or to receive the national minimum wage. But in a small number of cases, volunteers have managed to prove that they were, in the eyes of the law, employed – therefore gaining access to some or all employment rights.

In order to gain these rights, it must be shown that a volunteer is working under a contract. Factors which could contribute to this include paying a volunteer more than their out-of-pocket expenses, providing training to a volunteer that isn't related to the volunteer's specific role or giving very strict working conditions to a volunteer. If you have concerns about this issue, please refer to a book called 'Volunteers and the Law'. It's available for free at www.volunteering.org.uk/law.

Insurance

There is no national indemnity insurance scheme for people involved with LINKs and LINKs need to think carefully about the need for insurance for people involved in their local activities. People will be involved in a variety of activities, many of which may not require insurance. However, there are some activities (for example the 'enter and view' role) that may require indemnity insurance. LINKs need to be clear about the types of work that people are involved in, so that they can arrange appropriate insurance cover.

Health and safety

Volunteers should be reassured that LINKs have procedures in place to protect them as they carry out LINKs activities. Induction should include relevant health and safety information. Where necessary, risk assessments can be made, and acted on.

Criminal Records Bureau checks

People with regular contact with children or vulnerable adults as part of their role with LINKs should receive a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check. LINK regulations stipulate that anyone who is considered for authorisation by the LINK to 'enter and view' premises must have a check as part of the authorisation procedures. CRB checks can be an important part of deciding whether a person is suitable for particular roles, and should complement other risk assessment and safeguarding measures. A CRB check will probably not be justified if the volunteer doesn't come into regular contact with vulnerable service users. A new Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) is being set up and more information about its role can be found at www.isa.gov.uk.

Contact us

The NHS Centre for Involvement
024 7615 0705
Email info@links.nhs.uk
www.nhscentreforinvolvement.nhs.uk/links/

A simple explanation of LINKs
www.direct.gov.uk/localinvolvementnetworks

Information about Government policy
www.dh.gov.uk/patientpublicinvolvement

Further Information

Good Practice Bank on Working with Volunteers – the Good Practice Bank contains a wealth of free information for anyone working with volunteers or drafting a volunteer policy. <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice>

Volunteers Across the NHS: improving the patient experience and creating a patient-led service – a free good practice resource on working with volunteers in the NHS and in health and social care settings.
<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/volunteersacrossthenhs>

Reward and Recognition: it's the principles and practice of service user payment and reimbursement in health and social care.
http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4138523