

Many of our projects involve volunteers - in fact in the first three years of BAB we have been supported by 1162 volunteers giving over 21,000 hours of their time!

For all projects, but particularly those with a delivery model heavily reliant on volunteers, it is important for them to be supported properly. By taking care of your volunteers, you can improve the quality of the support given to older people and thereby improve how effective your project is at reducing loneliness and isolation.

Before you start!

- Think about whether the role should be paid or voluntary. Having a volunteer should bring something extra to your project; it should not simply be a replacement for paid work. Would you be happy with the role if you were a volunteer?
- When designing the role it can be useful to consult with other volunteers in your organisation to gather their opinions about the role. If you have had previous volunteers doing a similar role, ask them for their opinions on how it can be improved. If you know another organisation has a similar volunteer position you could ask to see their role profile.
- Make sure everyone in your organisation who will be involved with the volunteer is supportive of having one and that they are fully ready. For example if the volunteer will receive training before they begin their role, make sure this training is prepared. If you are not fully prepared beforehand then it can cause delays for the volunteer and there is a risk that they will drop out.
- Prepare the relevant forms and paperwork in advance. Are you required to have any specific policies, consent forms or risk assessments in place?
- Assign someone in the team to be the main point of contact for the volunteer and to have prime responsibility for them.

Finding volunteers who are suitable

Advertising the role...

- If you wish to advertise the role online, the websites of Voscur and do-it.org can be successful ways to find volunteers. However it is also valuable to advertise through your network of other organisations, through existing volunteers and through current project participants. **Some of the best volunteers are those who were previously participants**, particularly when it comes to loneliness and isolation.
- Remember that **the word 'volunteer' means different things to different people**. For example some cultures may be less familiar with this term, particularly if there is no suitable translation for it in their language. Other people may perceive it as very formal and therefore be put off.
- The language you use to describe it (e.g. 'helping out', 'supporting us', 'donating time', 'being a member') affects who will apply for the role. The same goes for the process of becoming a volunteer; a formal application form and interview will attract a different person compared to an informal phone call or a drop-in session. **Try to keep everything as relaxed as possible in order to avoid putting people off.**

Ensuring the volunteer understands what the role involves...

- **Meet with them in person** once they have applied or expressed an interest. This does not need to be a formal interview, but it gives you the chance to see if they are suitable for the role and if they understand it correctly.
- If you already have volunteers in your project, it can often be valuable to hold an event which **brings existing volunteers together with those who have expressed interest**. This gives potential volunteers the chance to find out more information and see whether the role really is for them.
- For similar reasons, it can be valuable for the volunteer to **shadow a staff member or another volunteer**. Not only will they gain a better understanding of the role, they may also learn useful tips which they can apply to their own role.

Retaining volunteers: supporting and motivating them to continue

- **Invest in them!** A great way to do this is through training. Offer them the chance to attend training even when it is not directly relevant to their role, for example by allowing them to attend any training being delivered to staff. More importantly, asking them what they would like to learn will really help them to feel valued and supported!
- **Stay in regular contact** with the volunteer. If you will not be seeing them face-to-face very often, then make sure you contact them regularly via email or phone. Proactively ask them if they have any questions or need any additional support from you – they may not mention it unless you specifically ask. If you have multiple volunteers with similar roles, it can be useful to bring them together as a group in order for them to meet each other and discuss how things are going in their roles.
- **Provide them with emotional support.** Working in the field of loneliness and isolation can sometimes be emotionally challenging. Remember to build in time to debrief the volunteer and provide them with emotional support so that they stay healthy and motivated.
- **Help them to set goals.** Everyone has a reason to volunteer, but it can be useful to reflect together on, for example, the 3 things they want to get out of volunteering. Regularly come back to these goals – does the volunteer feel these goals are being met? If not, can you change anything in order to achieve them? If their reasons for volunteering are not being met then the volunteer is more likely to leave.
- **Thank them for their hard work.** Remembering to say thank you can make a big difference to a volunteer. Small touches such as sending them a birthday or Christmas card can also be a great way to say thank you and to keep them motivated.
- **Involve them in your team.** If possible, invite them along to team meetings – this helps the volunteer to feel that their contributions are taken seriously and also enables the rest of the team to get a better understand of the volunteer's role. Inviting them to other events within your organisation also helps the volunteer to feel involved and included.
- How many times have you heard your volunteer say the common phrase "*I'm only a volunteer*"? **Encourage them to see the value they bring** to your project and the difference they are making to reduce loneliness and isolation.
- **Manage their expectations** – when looking at the big picture of older people's loneliness in the UK it can be easy for a volunteer to lose motivation and feel like their efforts are barely making a dent on a larger scale. However, it can help to focus instead on the impact they are having on individuals and the importance of this.

Spotlight: Involving older people as volunteers in your project

The **images and wording used in your advert** will influence who applies for the role. If you would like to encourage older volunteers, try including photos which feature a range of older people, and text which may appeal to them (for example focusing on the rich experience older volunteers can bring).



Reflect on the potential barriers that can sometimes prevent older people from volunteering. These may include transport difficulties, lack of time due to being a carer, a belief that they have nothing to offer or a fear that they will be given menial tasks due to their age. Understanding these potential barriers can then help you to overcome these and reach older volunteers, for example by providing roles with a range of time commitments.

Try not to organise evening meetings unless you are arranging transport for your volunteers. Being asked to travel at night, particularly if they need to use public transport, can deter older people from volunteering and mean you miss out on their contributions.