

Managing volunteers – a guide for those managing volunteer counsellors in voluntary organisations

by Anne Clafferty

Aims

The purpose of this information sheet is to suggest good practice guidelines for managers of volunteer counsellors, particularly in voluntary organisations. Although volunteers are not paid, they should be clear about what the organisation expects of them and what it undertakes to offer them.

The information sheet will look at:

- Supporting volunteers
- Policies and procedures
- Rewarding volunteers
- Managing supervision
- Effective management when things go wrong

Introduction

An organisation may have a mix of experienced volunteer counsellors and counsellors in training who wish to accumulate counselling hours in order to qualify. From an organisation's perspective, in view of the cost of recruiting and training volunteers, it makes sense to retain them, and managing them effectively can help to build a stable, loyal and enthusiastic team.

'Managing' applies to the whole process of recruiting, training, motivating and working with both paid staff and volunteers.

An organisation needs to be clear about how and why it uses volunteer counsellors; what qualifications and qualities it is looking for; what it can offer and what it expects from volunteers; the ways in which volunteer performance will be managed; and effective communication of this information to the volunteer counsellors.

Where an organisation has volunteer supervisors, similar considerations

apply. Clarity is necessary regarding the qualifications, experience and qualities sought; what sort of induction to provide into the service; what the channels of communication are if a supervisor has concerns about a supervisee; how many supervisees each supervisor should be expected to supervise; how long it is desirable for the supervisory relationship to last, and so on (see Mearns, D., 2004 and BACP, 2004).

Making expectations clear

Although volunteer counsellors are not employees, they should be expected to work within similar guidelines to those of employees, within the ethos of the organisation and within the principles of the BACP *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2007) (the *Ethical Framework*). It is essential, therefore, that there is clarity about the organisation and the terms on which volunteers are expected to work, including, for example:

- The ethos, aims and objectives of the organisation
- The management structure of the organisation and lines of reporting
- Accountability and a policy for dealing with complaints
- Agreed ways of working with clients (counselling model, caseload, supervision, assessment, confidentiality and client contracts, support other than counselling, referring on)
- Requirements for continued professional development and appraisal
- Requirements for attendance, punctuality and record-keeping
- Requirements for attendance at meetings and training
- Indemnity insurance

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- Finance of the organisation
- Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks

Supporting volunteers

There are many ways of supporting volunteers, keeping them in tune with the ethos of the organisation, keeping their skills and knowledge up to date and fostering team spirit.

Some or all of the following may be considered:

- Recruitment of prospective volunteers as part of the management process.
- A workshop or training course provided by the organisation can allow prospective volunteers to voice any fears or misgivings they may have about their counselling placement, introduce them to specialist issues likely to occur within the client base of the organisation, explore legal and ethical issues, and familiarise new volunteers with members of the staff and other volunteers.
- An induction process will introduce new volunteers to office procedures, paperwork and practical issues such as procedures to comply with Health and Safety legislation, fire exits, door entry codes, so they feel at ease and able to find their way around the building and administrative system. The volunteer's responsibility in relation to these systems should be made clear.
- A mentoring system can pair a new volunteer with a more experienced volunteer or member of staff and is particularly valuable in the period just after the volunteer has started with the organisation.
- A handbook for each volunteer containing useful information, policies and procedures (see below) is a valuable reminder of what to do and when and how to do it. An up-to-date copy can be held for reference in the office or library if there is one. Volunteers can take responsibility for keeping their handbook up to date.
- Training can be used to update volunteers about a new procedure or project and give them an opportunity to give their views, ask questions and discuss best practice.
- Where appropriate, a peer supervision or discussion group can be used to offer a confidential forum for discussing counselling issues with fellow counsellors in a non-threatening way.
- Team-building events, 'awaydays', seminars or workshops provide opportunities to discuss fundamental issues as well as to interact with other volunteers, staff and board members.
- A monthly newsletter provides volunteers with news about the service and updates about past and future events.

See also www.volunteering.org.uk

Policies and procedures

The organisation needs to have clear policies and procedures and to make sure these are available and accessible to volunteers. Among the most relevant are policies regarding:

- Equal opportunities
- Health and safety
- Organisational paperwork, what and why
- Confidentiality
- Taking a break
- Return from break
- Risk assessments and protocols
- Capability/performance assessments
- Mentoring and supervision

The Good Practice Bank of Volunteering England has much useful guidance in this area (<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/Resources/goodpracticebank/Core+Themes>)

Offering rewards

While it goes without saying that volunteers do not receive pay, they can be rewarded in many other ways. Many volunteers will derive satisfaction simply from giving their time voluntarily and doing a worthwhile and professional 'job' however, this satisfaction can be enhanced by other 'rewards', for example:

- Learning new skills, for example Web design, telephone skills, how to write funding bids, online counselling, taking part in delivering training or presentations
- Becoming an 'expert' in a particular aspect of the work. This might involve collecting articles about the topic for inclusion in the library, watching out for TV programmes and books about it, recommending books for the library, attending further training and answering questions from other counsellors
- Being consulted. It is pointless for the organisation to say that it values its volunteers if they never get the chance to give their opinion about the policies and practice of the organisation, particularly if there is any significant change. Being consulted about the organisation gives volunteers a real feeling of being valued and respected.
- Being provided with a library. Being able to borrow books from the organisation's library can be very valuable to volunteers. The library might consist of general books about counselling,

specialist texts relevant to the organisation's orientation and client base, and magazines and articles which can be photocopied.

- Being thanked. This should be done on a regular basis, perhaps in the context of a regular report of how many counselling hours have been completed, or how many clients have been seen. The organisation may wish to think of special ways to thank volunteers during Volunteers' Week (1–7 June each year – see www.volunteersweek.org.uk). For example, a certificate could be presented, or flowers bought for the counselling rooms. Volunteers themselves could be involved in deciding how they would like the event to be marked.
- Being recognised. Organisations may decide to accredit volunteers' work either externally or internally. The former involves using the criteria produced by an externally recognised awarding body. This involves an additional expense, but may have more status for volunteers. The latter involves the organisation in drawing up its own criteria, for example completion of a stated number of counselling hours and a set amount of training, and awarding an internal certificate.
- Having expenses reimbursed – it is good practice to reimburse volunteers for their travel and other out of pocket expenses. Volunteering should not mean that they are out of pocket. Volunteers may of course choose to donate their expenses to the organisation.
- Supervision – practice varies about whether volunteers' supervision is provided and funded by the organisation. Given the comments made here about expenses, it seems logical and fair that the organisation provides free supervision. Basically, there are three models:
 1. Free supervision provided (supervisors may be internal or external)
 2. Volunteers pay for their own supervision
 3. Volunteers pay for their own supervision but it is treated as an expense which can be claimed back from the organisation if the volunteer wishes
- Refreshments – providing drinks and biscuits/cakes at meetings, training and in the counselling area makes volunteers feel valued.
- Training – this should be offered on a regular basis, with the expectation that volunteers will attend most training provided. Volunteers can be consulted about what sort of training they would find valuable and be asked to give feedback afterwards.
- For external training, the organisation should ideally encourage volunteers to attend and subsidise them wherever possible. Volunteers

can be asked to report back on training attended, either by writing it up in the Newsletter/Bulletin, by giving a presentation and/or completing an evaluation.

- Information about jobs/courses/meetings – a regularly updated noticeboard can be helpful in disseminating information and the organisation can play a useful role in helping volunteers to compile CVs and job applications.
- Social events – these help build cohesion among volunteers and could range from a theatre visit, a meal at a restaurant, a party, to a summer camp in the country.

Managing supervision

An information pack on supervision should be provided to both the supervisor and volunteer. This should contain any policies and procedures of the organisation which relate to the counselling practice and to the supervision, and copies of any paperwork which will be used in the supervisory relationship.

It should indicate areas which the organisation expects to be explored in supervision, including the work being done with the client and its effect on the volunteer. These areas will probably include: training and professional development, attendance, issues of best practice in accordance with the *Ethical Framework*, types of case to be undertaken, referral on, and optimum client caseload. (Supervision might also assist volunteers to decide which kinds of cases (if any) might not be suitable for their level of training and experience).

It should indicate at what intervals the organisation expects reviews to be carried out between the supervisor and supervisee, and what happens to the outcomes of these reviews. It should also indicate what the organisation regards as good practice in terms of how many years a volunteer remains with one supervisor.

It is good practice for the volunteer to have the first meeting with their supervisor before the first client is seen. This will establish the contract, talk about the way of working and the practical details. Arrangements for client caseloads will vary depending upon the experience of the volunteer counsellor, but for new counsellors in training or on a placement, an organisation might prefer to start the volunteer with one client and gradually increase the caseload when supervisor and supervisee feel the time is right.

Volunteer counsellors in training may be having weekly or fortnightly group supervision at their college throughout their training course, which will provide them with additional support.

The organisation should have a mechanism for the supervisor to 'approve' the new volunteer's counselling practice and indicate that s/he is ready to take on additional clients. Mechanisms should also be in place for the supervisor and the organisation to pass on to each other any concerns about a supervisee's competence. Where the volunteer is on a college counselling course, the organisation and the volunteer's college should have a similar arrangement. Moreover, the organisation should retain a copy of the supervisor's report written for the volunteer's college course.

Managing when things go wrong

It is better to prevent problems arising, through being clear about what is being offered and expected, but if things do go wrong, it is easier to tackle them as early as possible. This should be done at first in an informal way, and additional training and/or support offered where appropriate, before progressing. If there is no improvement, the need may arise for more formal, written warnings and, ultimately, being asked to leave.

There should be a right of appeal and a clear time frame for each stage. There should be clear lines of responsibility, of which everyone is aware. A volunteer should have the right to be accompanied in any disciplinary forum (<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/Resources/goodpracticebank/Core+Themes/dealingwithproblems>).

Issues which may arise with volunteer counsellors might include:

- Persistently bad timekeeping and/or attendance
- Persistently failing to follow agreed procedures or paperwork
- Taking on tasks which go beyond the agreed remit
- Failure to respect client confidentiality
- Breaching health and safety regulations
- Misuse of the organisation's equipment or facilities
- Discrimination on grounds of disability/race/gender
- Failure to keep skills and knowledge up to date.

In some cases, volunteers can be suspended immediately while an investigation is carried out. These include, but are not limited to, acts that constitute gross misconduct, e.g. theft, assault, acts of violence, malicious damage, deliberate falsification of documents, harassment or being under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The decision to suspend a volunteer should be confirmed to the volunteer in writing.

If a client complains about a counsellor, the counsellor should be told clearly and as soon as possible about the complaint and invited to respond to the line manager. The client should be asked if they would like to see a different counsellor and kept informed about what is being done to investigate their complaint. Depending on the seriousness of the complaint, the manager may decide that the volunteer counsellor should be suspended while the matter is being investigated. Any such investigation should be carried out confidentially and only discussed among those who are directly involved in resolving the matter.

Conclusion

Volunteer counsellors are a valuable resource which a voluntary organisation needs to plan, support, guide and nurture. Clear policies and guidelines provide a secure basis from which volunteers can work. They also inform staff members about the role of the volunteers and provide a framework for dealing with complaints or shortcomings in volunteer counsellors' performance.

About the author

From August 2005 until February 2008 Anne Clafferty was Counselling Services Manager for SAVANA (formerly Women's Rape and Sexual Violence Service) a BACP-accredited service which offers counselling and support to female survivors of sexual violence in North Staffordshire. SAVANA is a voluntary organisation with about 20 volunteer counsellors as well as staff counsellors and is a member of the national Rape Crisis Co-ordinating Group.

Anne was previously a teacher and university lecturer and has recently trained as an online counsellor.

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It should be noted that this information sheet offers broad guidance, which sets out professional good practice, but it should not be substituted for legal and for other professional advice applicable to your particular circumstances.

BACP is aware that law and practice are always in a process of development and change. If you have evidence that this information sheet is now inaccurate or out of date feel free to contact us. If you know of any impending changes that affect its content we would also be pleased to hear from you.