

HEALTH AND SAFETY FOR VOLUNTEERS

Organisations have legal obligations towards their volunteers. It is good practice, therefore, to treat volunteers with equal consideration when it comes to health and safety.

Duty of Care

Generally, a duty of care arises where one individual or group undertakes an activity which could reasonably harm another, either physically, mentally, or economically.

A duty of care can arise in many ways, which may not always be obvious, for example:

- lending equipment to others;
- holding charity walks or sponsored runs;
- running fetes or community events;
- organising day trips;
- selling food as part of a charity stall.

The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 is the primary piece of legislation covering occupational health and safety in the United Kingdom. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) is responsible for enforcing the Act and a number of other Acts and Statutory Instruments relevant to the working environment.

The Act sets out the general duties which employers, the self-employed and people in control of premises have towards their employees and others who may be affected by their activities, including volunteers and members of the public. (Where an organisation, including a charitable or voluntary group, has at least one employee under a contract of employment, it is considered to be an employer for the purposes of the Act and the regulations made under it.) With respect to those who may not be employed, every employer has a general duty to ensure the health and safety of such people, including providing them with information.

Depending on the activities concerned, an employer may also have a responsibility to carry out a risk assessment. The results of the risk assessment will determine if the employer needs to provide volunteers with information and training.

Organisations with responsibility for buildings and premises

An organisation that owns, controls or is responsible for premises has a duty to make sure that the building is safe for use and complies with all the relevant health and safety regulations. This duty applies to premises such as community centres and scout huts, and also to attached car parks and playgrounds etc.

Volunteer-only Organisations

If an organisation has no employees, it may not be able to achieve the same standards of health and safety in the short term as are required for employees.

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Health and Safety Policy

A health and safety policy is the foundation on which procedures and practices are developed. It also sets forth the organisation's commitment to good health and safety standards.

Organisations with paid staff and volunteers

Employers with fewer than five employees are not obliged to have a written policy, but are strongly advised to do so. If an organisation involves volunteers, they should always be included in the health and safety policy as a matter of good practice.

Volunteer-only Organisations

If an organisation has no employees it is not obliged to have a written health and safety policy, but is strongly recommended to do so. Developing a health and safety policy helps to clarify procedures and responsibilities.

Health, Safety and Welfare

Organisations with paid staff and volunteers

All employers must provide a safe place to work which is clean and risk-free, to reduce the likelihood of ill health or injury. All employers should provide adequate supervision. Employees must be given training and information in order to give them sufficient skills and knowledge to carry out their work safely.

Volunteer-only Organisations

These regulations do not apply to organisations with no employees. However, they do need to ensure that their volunteers work in a safe environment where levels of risk have been reduced to a minimum.

Risk Assessment

Risk is assessed by identifying a hazard and assessing the degree of harm it could cause, against the likelihood of it occurring. The assessment then indicates what measures need to be put in place, if any, to reduce the risk to an acceptable level.

Organisations with paid staff and volunteers

Employers should ensure that their risk assessments always involves employees and volunteers who are involved in the activities which are being risk assessed.

Volunteer-only Organisations

Voluntary groups with no employees are not bound to conduct risk assessments, but should consider doing them anyway if they wish to meet their duty of care. Risk assessments are an excellent way to avoid potential problems becoming real ones.

Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH)

Using chemicals or other hazardous substances at work can put people's health at risk, causing diseases including asthma, dermatitis or cancer. The COSHH regulations require employers to control substances that could harm workers' health.

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Organisations with paid staff and volunteers

All employers have a legal duty to assess the workplace for risks to health which may be caused by hazardous substances and must take all necessary steps to control any risks identified.

Volunteer-only Organisations

Voluntary groups with no employees are not bound to conduct a COSHH assessment, but should consider doing one anyway if they wish to meet their duty of care. Risk assessments are an excellent way to avoid potential problems becoming real ones.

Fire Safety and Risk Assessment

All public and community buildings, whether owned or operated by an employer or an organisation without employees, must meet minimum levels of standards so that the risk of fire is reduced. The local fire brigade should be consulted for advice.

First Aid

Organisations with paid staff and volunteers

All employers have a legal duty to make a first aid assessment. The need for first aid will depend on the organisation's activities. As a minimum, an organisation with employees must provide at least one first aid box and display a notice informing staff of:

- the location of the first aid box;
- who the first aider or appointed person is (see below); and
- where the first aider or appointed person can be found.

An appointed person is someone who has basic first aid knowledge. They take charge in an emergency and are responsible for arranging for the emergency services to be called.

Volunteer-only Organisations

Voluntary groups with no employees are not bound to conduct a first aid assessment, although it is clearly good practice. It can also be useful to have at least one first aid trained volunteer.

Working with other Organisations

When organisations work together it can sometimes lead to gaps in health and safety provision. For example, one might assume that the other has taken responsibility. Alternatively, conflict or confusion can arise if two organisations have differing policies on health and safety.

When planning a partnership, whether on a long term basis or for a one-day project, organisations may find it helpful to work through the list of 'basic health and safety principles' given above. This should help to ensure both organisations understand their responsibilities in terms of risk assessment etc.

When planning joint activities, organisations need to decide:

- who has ultimate responsibility;
- how the organisation with responsibility will ensure its policies and procedures are implemented;

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- what the organisation will do if standards are not met;
- what a volunteer should do if they are dissatisfied with or concerned about health and safety risks; and
- how to record this information.

Last review: July 2025

Next review: July 2027