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Interviews and references

How formal your interview is depends on your organisation. If the role is demanding and involves significant responsibility, you may want a more formal process. If the role is more casual you may want to keep it informal and call the interview a 'visit' or 'chat'.

Either way, before the interview, you should let the volunteer know what to expect and allay any fears they might have.

Interviewing volunteers

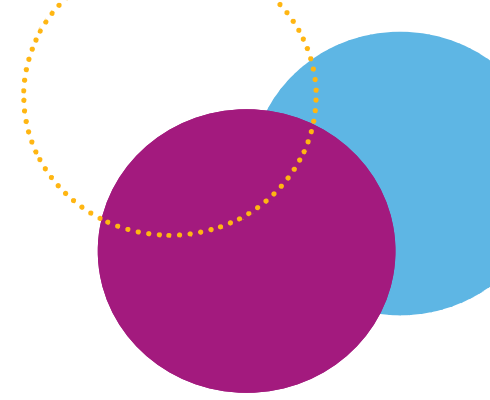
Interviewing potential volunteers should:

- Provide the chance to explain about the work of your organisation and how volunteers fit in
- Give you the opportunity to assess the suitability of volunteers and enable you to make sure they have the skills and qualities that you need, or to match their skills most effectively to a suitable role
- Give volunteers a chance to find out more, to help them decide whether your organisation is the right one for them
- Help to ensure that all volunteers are treated consistently, and given the same opportunity to demonstrate their suitability for the role

It is useful to find out why the individual wants to volunteer and what motivates them. This helps to ensure there's a good match between volunteer and role. You also have the chance to explain more about your induction and any training you offer.

Planning an interview

- Make sure that other colleagues know that a potential volunteer is coming and ensure that someone is available to welcome them.
- Have any background information to hand as the volunteer may ask you questions.
- Draw up a list of questions in advance based on the volunteer role description. Using the same questions for a particular role creates fairness, but feel free to ask volunteers to expand on their answers. Remember the interview is your main selection tool.
- Use open questions, such as 'What experience do you have...?', 'What is important about...?', 'How did you...?'. As an interviewer you should be doing more listening than talking.
- If you are interviewing several people, you may need to take notes. It is less intimidating if you explain to the volunteer why you are making notes, just in case they think they have said something wrong.
- If you are not going to make a decision during the interview, then tell the volunteer when you will let them know the result. The interview may also give the volunteer an opportunity to 'self-select', i.e. to reject the role if they feel it is not right for them.



References

Some form of independent verification is good practice for most regular roles. Some organisations ask for references in writing; others prefer telephone references. For reasons of practicality and consistency it is sensible to have a standard list of questions to ask. If taking up telephone references, keep a written record of points raised, the name of the referee and the date.

The questions asked should verify in what capacity the person has known the volunteer, and for how long, and could ask specific questions which relate to the role description and skills for the role the volunteer will be performing. You might also want to ask whether the referee would have any concerns or doubts about offering the person this role. When asked specific questions, it is much harder for a referee to conceal any doubts or concerns than it would be in a bland, general 'character reference'.

Beware of general written references produced by a prospective volunteer. They may have been supplied as a way of encouraging the person's exit from their previous role/post, and are also open to forgery.

You will need some guidelines on who you will accept as a referee, and how long they must have known the person. Some volunteers, especially if they have been ill or out of paid work for a while or if they have recently come to the UK, may find it difficult to suggest a referee, particularly if they assume you expect an employment reference. You might have to suggest alternatives such as a teacher, tutor, social worker, health professional, volunteer manager or neighbour.