

Guidance for those Supporting Volunteers

Firstly, we would like to acknowledge that many staff and volunteers have a wealth of experience in supporting volunteers. These guidelines have been put together as a good practice resource, to remind experienced people and to support those who might be newer to supporting volunteers.

Support and catch up sessions provide feedback to the organisation and support to the volunteer and are used to:

- To provide an opportunity to reflect and talk about the volunteer's role
- To reinforce Independent Age's procedures and values
- To exchange information and feedback relevant to the role
- To raise any personal issues or concerns
- To check out whether the volunteer has particular aspirations/goals related to their volunteering, and how these can be achieved
- To provide support and recognition for volunteers
- To ensure that the organisation operates to the best possible standards

Catch up sessions are an opportunity for the Independent Age contact to understand any issues relating to the volunteering role, including potential safeguarding of the older person the volunteer supports.

One of the key issues when supporting volunteers is the recognition that people volunteer for many different reasons. Each person will have different factors that cause them to be satisfied or dissatisfied with their volunteering experience. Some of the most frequently mentioned reasons for volunteering are:

- Give something back
- Make a difference to the lives of others
- Help others less fortunate or without a voice
- Feel valued and part of a team
- Spend quality time away from work or a busy lifestyle
- Gain confidence and self-esteem
- A route to employment
- A chance to try something new

The support and catch up process

Independent Age has a structured programme of catch ups at one month, three months, six months and then six monthly after that. This helps volunteers to have direction and clarity in their role and gives an opportunity to discuss any potential concerns.

The **One Month Volunteer Catch up Form** and the **Three and Six Months Volunteer Catch up Form** will help guide the conversation between the volunteer and their Independent Age contact. The areas covered in these forms include:

- Information about their wellbeing
- Updates and reflection on their volunteer role, including any safeguarding concerns particularly for friendship volunteers
- An opportunity to explore development opportunities
- General feedback on the role and organisation
- And a list of actions identified for the next catch up

Catch up sessions are about the volunteer and their role, to enable them to develop as a volunteer. During these sessions, it is important that the volunteers is listened to, thanked and recognised for their contribution, remembering their motivations for volunteering.

The catch up session

The volunteer's Independent Age contact should provide timely and appropriate support to volunteers in all aspects of their role. The conversation should be open and supportive especially if the discussion is about the emotional challenges of the role.

A brief reminder about listening skills

Listen- let the volunteer know you are listening

Hear- ensure you hear what is being said and not what you expect to hear

Wait- do not jump to fill in the silence

Enjoy- this chance to get to know the volunteer

If the catch up is face to face

See- behind the body language

Watch- for the volunteers' reactions

Giving positive feedback

Providing regular positive feedback to volunteers is essential as it helps the volunteer develop, improves their relationship with their Independent Age contact and gain confidence in their volunteering.

Tips for giving positive feedback:

- Try and give the feedback as soon as possible after the event. Feedback can go stale if left too long.
- Give regular praise (if appropriate).
- Be proportionate in your feedback. Too much praise can feel insincere.
- The best positive feedback is clear and specific. Tell the person exactly why you are praising them.
- Let the volunteer know about the impact of their efforts and how it links with the values of Independent Age.

- If there is not a specific behaviour or activity to praise, always remember to thank volunteers for their commitment, efforts and attitude.

Giving constructive criticism

Constructive criticism can be used if problems have been identified. Handled sensitively this can avoid problems escalating and developing into bigger issues that might end the volunteering relationship.

As a general rule, all feedback should be:

- Not personal, talk about the role/situation rather than the person
- Well-timed and current
- Specific and descriptive
- Referring back to relevant policies and procedures
- Remedy seeking and not blaming
- Challenging but enabling change
- About the issue rather than the person
- Focused on solutions to avoid similar situations in future
- Checked to ensure the volunteer understands what has been agreed

How to approach difficult conversations

Volunteers who are supporting other volunteers and are aware of a difficult situation should first speak to their Wellbeing Project Officer to discuss the best way to handle the situation.

Regularly keeping in contact with volunteers helps to avoid problems and complaints developing. However, there will be occasions in which the Independent Age contact might be faced with a difficult conversation with their volunteer. By addressing these uncomfortable situations promptly and without delay, you can avoid them escalating.

Talking to people honestly and with respect creates mutually rewarding relationships, even when conversations are difficult.

Handling a difficult conversation requires skill and empathy, but ultimately, it requires the courage to go ahead and do it. If you're unsure of how to best approach a crucial conversation, here are some tips to guide you:

1. Be clear about the issue

To prepare for the conversation, you need to ask yourself two important questions:

- "What exactly is the issue that is causing the problem?"

- "What is the impact that the behaviour is having on the older person, the volunteer, the team and/or the organisation?"

Familiarise yourself with policies and procedures so you have the facts to back up your arguments.

2. Know how to begin

Some people put off having the conversation because they don't know how to start. The best way to start is with a direct approach, which shows clarity and respect. You don't want to ambush people by surprising them about the nature of the "chat."

3. If meeting face to face, choose the right place to have the conversation.

Consider meeting in a neutral place, a meeting room where you can sit adjacent to each other without a desk as a barrier. Do not rule out a coffee shop if it is private enough.

4. Be curious

Always approach conversations with an open attitude and a genuine desire to learn and hear the other person. Start from a place of curiosity and respect by acknowledging that you don't know everything and try to learn as much as possible about the issue. Even when the evidence is clear, we still owe it to the volunteer to let them tell their story.

5. Give them your full attention

Be interested and proactive, and gather as much information as possible. Ask non-judgemental follow-up questions. Make it clear to the volunteer that you've heard and understood them.

Give full attention to the volunteer and what they have to say, encouraging them to elaborate where appropriate. You can mirror back what the volunteer said to show that you understand them correctly.

6. Focus on what you're hearing, not what you're saying

You don't actually need to talk that much during a difficult conversation. Instead, focus on listening, reflecting, and observing. Conversations rarely go as planned so take the pressure off yourself and don't spend time mentally rewording their thoughts. Don't take over the conversation – you are trying to gather facts not put your interpretation onto the situation.

7. Manage the emotions

Understand and manage the emotions in the discussion, both your emotions and those of the volunteer. You might suddenly be faced with anger or tears. Don't shy away and acknowledge all emotions on display.

8. Be comfortable with silence

There may be moments in the conversation where a silence occurs. Don't rush to fill it with words. A pause can also have a calming effect and can help us connect better. Stop talking and allow them their moment—it can lead to a better outcome.

9. Trying to preserve the relationship

It takes time to build connections with people and sometimes only minutes to go wrong. Think about whether your conversation can fix the situation. Some relationships can't be repaired. This is OK as long as you have acted fairly and in good faith.

10. Be consistent

Ensure that your objective is fair and that you are using a consistent approach. For example, if the volunteer thinks you have one set of rules for one person and a different set for another person, it could be perceived as showing favouritism.

11. Expect a positive outcome

Tell yourself, "This will result in an improved relationship." Focus on the long term gains that the conversation will create for the relationship. As a result, you also become more comfortable approaching these conversations in the future.

12. End the conversation

End the conversation with a clear understanding and agreement on the next steps to take. Brainstorming and continued inquiry can be useful. Ask the volunteer what they think might work. Whatever they say, try to find something you like and build on it. Asking for the other's point of view usually creates safety and encourages them to engage.

Once you have planned the conversation, it's a good idea to talk to your line manager to agree how to lead the conversation and agree what outcomes could be acceptable.

Finally, after a difficult conversation you should schedule a follow up to evaluate progress and close the issue.