

# Postponing or closing a volunteer programme

## How to communicate with your volunteers

Maintaining effective volunteer communication is essential to the success of every volunteer involving organisation. To keep volunteers engaged in their volunteering beyond COVID-19, it's important to let them know what your organisation's needs are, express appreciation for their efforts, and make sure they understand how important their contributions really are.

Right now getting that message across may be way down your organisational to-do list. Your volunteer programme might need to be curtailed based on the age profile of your volunteers or any of the other 'at-risk' categories related to COVID-19. Perhaps you just sent an email to all your volunteers telling them that volunteering is suspended and promising to get back to them. Last year you were telling them how important their contribution was, now you are 'effectively' saying that you don't need them. Their health and safety are your primary concerns but imagine being a volunteer receiving that email, especially one for whom volunteering is their only social outlet?

## TIMES OF CHANGE

In these challenging times, lots of volunteer involving organisations are finding themselves facing a prospect no-one relishes, and people don't often plan for - the task of closing or suspending their project or even their organisation. Here are some tips to help.

### 01 **Talk to your key partners first**

Before making any sort of announcement about the closure, you'll need to talk to key partners like board members / trustees, volunteers, stakeholders, funders etc who will be affected. The last thing you want is for key people to find out the news through gossip, or via a press release or news story. Draw up a list of the people you need to talk to, and decide who will carry out each of these conversations.

### 02 **Be decisive and plan ahead as far as you can**

It can be tempting to hang on as long as you can before making the decision to close a volunteer programme. You might be hoping for a last minute reprieve. However, being decisive and setting a date can give you the space to plan an orderly suspension or cessation of your volunteer programme. Remember that if you say 'we will get back to you' then volunteers will expect to hear from you, so don't make false promises.

## 03 **Be open and honest with staff about what's happening**

As soon as a decision has been made regarding the suspension or cessation of your volunteer programme, communicate with the staff concerned. Be available to answer questions and concerns, and keep everyone informed of timescales and other arrangements. Answering a question with 'we don't know yet' is better than letting rumours and speculation run riot.

## 04 **You want volunteers to come back**

On the far side of COVID-19, society may have changed fundamentally. You can't just send your volunteers an email in 6 or 9 months' time asking them to report for duty. If you are expecting them to come back you need to keep communicating, perhaps every month, even just to let them know that you are thinking about them.

## 05 **Plan how you're going to communicate with the community**

Just as you would write a communications strategy, you should sit down and plan how you're going to communicate the news. Are there media opportunities you could use to highlight what you've achieved?

## 06 **Get your staff involved with communicating about the closure**

'We are stopping because of Health and Safety' may very well be true, but for the volunteer, this might just sound like protecting your organisation. Be personal, talk about the value of volunteering.



## 07 Understand that people may be upset

Although you've had time to plan and absorb the news, bear in mind that the announcement may come as a shock to some. Volunteers often have a long association with an organisation and feel a high level of commitment. As with your staff, you might need to be available to answer questions, and to listen to the concerns of volunteers and partners. Make sure you provide a means for them to contact you with any concerns they have.

## 08 Think about 'rehomeing' volunteering

Can you actually deliver services without volunteers? Is it possible for some of the volunteering to be done virtually? Are there projects put on the long finger for many years, such as reporting or statistics that could now be done remotely? Perhaps some of your services still need to be delivered and will continue? Be careful when you send this message out that volunteers don't feel that one group is regarded as more or less important than another.

## 09 What will volunteering look like in a year's time?

Some people may be more reserved in the time they give volunteering post COVID-19 and the emergency may have a long standing effect on volunteers' health and wellbeing. With that in mind, don't expect your full volunteer cohort to return as some will just call it a day, but others may disengage as they never felt connected once the programme stopped. Keep in touch with your volunteer team.

## 10 Diversify

Virtual volunteering, informal volunteering, micro volunteering, episodic volunteering – all of these come to the fore in a time of crisis. Now is the time to start looking about how you can engage these different forms of volunteering to build up a sustainable volunteer programme after COVID-19. Globally, 70% of those volunteering are involved in informal volunteering and that number is growing year over year.

## 11 Think about the perception of charities

There's been negative press in relation to a small number of charities with governance issues and unfortunately all organisations can then get tarred with the same brush. Be a shining light and engage your volunteers. You want the volunteers to share your positivity, so let them know you care and are looking forward to welcoming them back. Remember these are your recruiters of future volunteers. Think of the volunteer who tells the story of how their organisation's Volunteer Manager sends them a monthly email update talking about the value of volunteering compared to the volunteer who tells their friends that they haven't heard from the organisation.

## 12 Remember to celebrate

Do you celebrate volunteers' birthdays, special events, national holidays, National Volunteering Week? You can still do those things with an email, a personal thank you or a phone call.

As the old BT advert says 'It good to talk' and that is true now more than ever

