

Staying safe when volunteering

We know that many people and communities are taking positive action to come together and help one another as a collective response to coronavirus. As a charity focused on volunteering, this is so heartening to see at such a critical time. If you have formed one of these community groups, we wanted to provide you with a helping hand by giving you some guidance from our 60 years of experience in this field on how to stay safe.

We hope some of this is useful to you and your communities. Thank you for all you are doing for each other, it really does show the best of communities in this country in a crisis!

Why produce this guide?

As part of this, you may see something that concerns you about the welfare or safety of someone in your community.

It seems likely that we may well need each other for some time through this crisis, so it's important that we put the structures in place to keep each other safe during this period.

We recommend that someone amongst your group takes the lead for keeping you and the people you seek to support safe, and that that effectively becomes their voluntary role in this: a volunteer organiser, if you like. This role is so important to ensuring the informal activity taking place is done in a way that doesn't make the problem worse, or cause more risks for those involved.

This guide is written with that individual in mind, to help guide them on how to do this well. We've created a series of posters and information that you can follow to make sure your volunteers and the people in your local area can stay safe, and raise any concerns about people's safety with the relevant authorities.

What is safeguarding?

Safeguarding is the measures and steps we all take when we are concerned that someone – a child or an adult – may be at risk, or suffering from, or at risk of significant harm. This include physical, psychological, financial, sexual abuse and grooming, and even neglect and self-neglect.

It's important to be able to recognise these so that you or your volunteers can stay safe, and know how to alert the relevant authorities who can then take action to make sure people are safe in your community.

Simple steps to take

- Follow the principles of
 - Stay safe
 - See it
 - Recognise it
 - Report it
- Adopt a simple code of conduct for you and your volunteers to follow
- Share information about concerns you witness with agencies such as your local Safeguarding team
- Have a simple procedure to recruit volunteers in your community
- Provide effective risk assessments of whether activity is safe, and regular contact with your volunteers
- If you are concerned that someone might be in immediate danger, contact the emergency services
- Wherever possible, have procedures for safer recruitment in the selection of community volunteers – although in times of crisis we need to be flexible in our approach.
- If you are the leading volunteer: safer recruitment and good practice requires volunteers to be DBS. Here is the link <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service/about> Volunteers can get DBS for free.

There will be a local safeguarding team – often run by your local council – which you can contact if you have any concerns about the safety or welfare of members of your community. It's important to know where your role stops, and where local services can step in to help.

How to deal with safeguarding concerns

If you or your volunteers see something that concerns them, it's important that they stay safe and share information with the local safeguarding team. A code of conduct can help make this process simple, straightforward and safe.

A code of conduct should cover four areas: recognising signs and symptoms, sharing information, asking questions, keeping safe.

Recognising signs and symptoms

Possible signs and symptoms which can indicate harm or abuse are many and varied, and recognising these is an important part of keeping safe in volunteering.

Sharing information

Ask yourself if sharing information with the relevant authorities is:

- Necessary and proportionate
- Relevant
- Adequate
- Accurate
- Timely
- Secure
- Recorded

Ask questions

It's ok to ask parents or carers open, non-judgmental questions in order to clarify and contextualise any concerns before making a safeguarding referral.

However, there will be situations when it will not be appropriate to approach parents or carers if you believe the parents or carers could put the child or adult at increased risk of harm, or if you feel it is unsafe to do so.

Remember to stay calm. Panic will only cause distress. Actively listen. Use non-judgmental language to ask where/when type questions, but avoid enquiring about details. Allow the person the time to say what they need to say; don't make them repeat what they are saying again and again. It's important you don't promise confidentiality, as you may want to share information with the local Safeguarding team. But it is equally important that you reassure them they have done the right thing by telling you.

Do record what you have heard or seen exactly as it was said to you, or seen by you. Record as much detail as possible. Be careful not to interpret their words. Forward your concern immediately to your local Safeguarding team.

If you don't know who this is, and require support in identifying if this is a safeguarding concern or simply to understand where to go next, you can email us at communications@volunteeringmatters.org.uk and we'll respond as soon as we can.