

Health and Safety in the Voluntary Sector – a guide for small groups

Introduction

Health & Safety is important for any voluntary organisation. As well as ensuring the general well-being of your staff and volunteers, you should consider your members and service users as well. If something goes badly wrong, you or your trustees

could find yourself being taken to court if it can be shown that you acted negligently. This leaflet explains the basic points and shows where you can find out more.

But we don't do anything dangerous

Official figures show that in a typical year in the workplace (which includes voluntary sector activities), there are about 350 fatalities, more than 30,000 major injuries and over 130,000 injuries resulting in three or more day's absence from work.

or handling, so almost any situation has the potential for an accident to occur. And don't forget that if someone is doing work at home, that becomes part of the workplace.

The commonest causes of injury are simple trips, slips and falls, along with strains caused by lifting, carrying

The Legal Bits

All organisations, whether limited companies or not, have a basic legal duty under the Health & Safety at Work Act 1974 to maintain safe premises and working environments for anyone involved with the organisation, whether as an employee, a volunteer or a service user.

However, even if you don't have any employees, it's good practice to have one anyway.

Health & Safety in shops, offices and other non-industrial premises is generally the responsibility of the local authority and their inspectors are happy to provide advice on particular issues that may apply to local charities or voluntary groups.

If your organisation employs more than 5 people it must have a written Health & Safety Policy Statement.



This can be a fairly simple document, outlining who has overall responsibility for health and safety in the organisation, or for particular tasks, such as maintaining the first aid box. It will also show the names of any qualified first-aiders and fire wardens; the number of the company responsible for maintaining the fire extinguishers and alarms and how often they need servicing. The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) provide a safety policy statement template in their information pack (see the end of this HOW? guide for details)

Conducting a Risk Assessment

We all look at risks in different ways – how many people are scared of flying in an aeroplane yet think nothing of dashing across a busy road, which is far more likely to put them at risk of injury or even death! When assessing risks in the workplace you need to

look at each potential hazard and estimate just how bad an accident it could cause and how likely that is to happen.

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When a situation is **both** likely to happen **and** potentially serious, then dealing with this should be your first priority. For example, if the top landing rail on a stairway is loose because the supports have rotted – when someone leant on it, they could fall down the stairwell. **Assessment: High Risk - get it fixed urgently.**

The 5 Steps to Risk Assessment

1. Look for the hazards
2. Decide who might be harmed and how
3. Evaluate the risk - how bad would the accident be if it happened? Give priority to situations which could produce the worst results. Can you: remove the risk altogether? if not, how can you control it to make it acceptable?
4. Record your findings
5. Review and revise as necessary

Knowing where to start

- Try to put yourself in the position of a visitor to your premises. You know where everything is, so you instinctively avoid trouble spots. Bear in mind also that voluntary organisations are more likely to have staff or volunteers who may be elderly or have a disability.
- Don't forget to look out for the little things – a small trip can still cause a nasty injury: For example, if everyone who visits your organisation trips over the small step between two offices, clearly it needs at least a "mind the step" sign and a white or yellow 'alert' painted edge. Can the step be replaced by a ramp?
- Do people have to keep standing on a stool to reach the top shelf of the stationery cupboard? Perhaps you could keep frequently-needed items somewhere more accessible or buy an appropriate ladder.
- Look for trailing cables across the floor – an elderly volunteer in one charity suffered a serious injury after tripping over a cable and hitting their head on an adaptor plug sticking out of the wall.
- Look for overloaded shelves, low beams, steep, poorly-lit stairs, highly-polished or uneven floors, in short anything which could cause injury or lead to a tripping or falling hazard.
- Is all of your electrical equipment safe? This is especially important if it was donated second hand. Get it checked (called PAT testing) by an electrician. Don't allow volunteers to do electrical work unless they are formally qualified.
- Don't forget about lifting and stretching injuries as well – does anyone's job involve frequent lifting of heavy weights? Have they been trained how to lift safely, or could the lifting be reduced by repositioning something or by using mechanical handling equipment?
- Are any flammable materials stored on the premises? These could range from paper, paint or plastics to donated furniture and clothing. Make sure there are adequate fire extinguishers and that people know how to operate them. It also helps to make your premises "No Smoking," then you can fit smoke detectors. They don't cost much but can be lifesavers.
- Avoid using portable gas heaters. Make sure any heaters you do have are well clear of anything which may brush against them – an electric heater in one charity was left on all night and set fire to an office chair pushed up against it, causing smoke damage to the whole building.

The Perils of the Great Outdoors

It's not just in the office you have to watch out, either. All the following accidents occurred to voluntary organisations (fortunately without serious injury) – how many could you have seen coming? What could have been done to minimise the danger?

- At a garden fete, a tea urn placed on a rocky trestle table tipped over, spilling five gallons of boiling water within inches of several people, including small children.
- A volunteer was demonstrating making bird-boxes at a country fair when the head of his hammer flew off, hitting a child standing close behind him.
- A volunteer lit a cigarette inside a van containing a leaky gas cylinder, causing an explosion powerful enough to bend the panels of the van outwards.
- A volunteer using a sledgehammer to drive in fence posts missed and broke the thumb of the person holding the post.
- A person putting up a banner for a jumble sale was left dangling from a roof after the ladder fell from under them.

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Personal Safety

- Not all risks come from the actual working environment – some come from the job itself or the client group the organisation is working with:
- Be aware of risks to volunteers or staff working alone – especially if they have to visit clients in run-down neighbourhoods or deal with difficult issues where the client may become angry or frustrated and take it out on the worker. Try and arrange such meetings on your own premises or send more than one person out on the case.
- In these days of high-tech communications, many people carry a mobile phone – perhaps your group could obtain a communal one, which staff could take with them when working alone or in an isolated spot where it could be difficult to find help in case of an accident.
- Where necessary, carry out CRB disclosure checks on volunteers who will be working with vulnerable groups, such as children or the elderly. (*see the KnowledgeBank on this subject for more information*)
- Be aware of the risk posed by money – don't transport significant sums around or leave someone working alone in a building known to contain cash, for example, a charity shop.

Be Risk Aware

After a while you will become used to spotting the risks associated with your organisation and its work. It's a good idea to build up a list of all the risks you have identified, even if you have now addressed or removed the risk, so anyone doing the risk assessment or the same job, in the future, knows what to look out for. You will need an accident book if

you employ staff and this also helps you to identify areas of concern – after three people have cut their fingers on the sharp edge of the same filing cabinet, wouldn't it be a good idea to have the metal rubbed down? It's a good idea therefore to keep an accident book even if you have no employees.

Information and Training

Health & Safety law requires employers to provide information, instruction and training for employees. Although the law is less clear about volunteers, it is only good practice for voluntary organisations to do the same for volunteers. In any case, as European law seems to be moving towards treating volunteers in exactly the same way as employees as far as Health and Safety is concerned, you might as well get ready for it.

Issue everyone with a leaflet outlining the Health and Safety issues that apply to your organisation. Conduct new volunteers round the premises, outlining all the hazards they might encounter through not being familiar with your building or the job. Give specific training when required, such as safe tool-handling for a building or countryside project. Supply protective

clothing where necessary, such as work gloves or footwear with reinforced toecaps when dealing with heavy or sharp objects.

Consider formal training for volunteers and staff if the job requires special skills or use of specialised equipment – there should be plenty of short courses in your area dealing with either general Health and Safety or specific issues, such as food hygiene, first aid and so on. High Peak CVS can provide some of these courses, or signpost you to other providers.

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Further Information

The Health and Safety Executive publishes a wide range of free leaflets about all aspects of Health & Safety. They also sell books on specific safety subjects. Telephone the HSE Infoline on 0845 345 0055 (8.30am – 5.00pm Mon – Fri) for a full list, or see their website (details below).

- "Community and Voluntary Workers—A guide to Health and Safety at Work", HSG192, £13.50
- "Health and Safety for Community and Voluntary Organisations", Video training £25+VAT
- The HSE website also has full details of HSE publications and services. Some of the leaflets can be downloaded directly from the site at: www.hse.gov.uk . To order a publication call 01787 881165

For local Health and Safety advice, contact High Peak Borough Council Environmental Health Services on 0845 129 7777.

- They cover Health and Safety in the local voluntary sector and are the people to whom any major accident resulting in death, serious injury or an injury causing an absence of more than three days should be reported under **RIDDOR** (Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1985).

This fact sheet is one of a series of fact sheets produced by High Peak CVS. **They can all be downloaded from our website www.highpeakcvs.org.uk/how**

High Peak CVS works to ensure that local voluntary and community groups can access as much support, advice and information as possible. We help groups in many different areas, such as funding, charity registration, practical services including printing, training and links to

training and with legal issues. We have resources, including a meeting room, computers and OHP for use by groups.

To find out how we can help your group, please contact us on 01663 735 350 or email hello@highpeakcvs.org.uk

