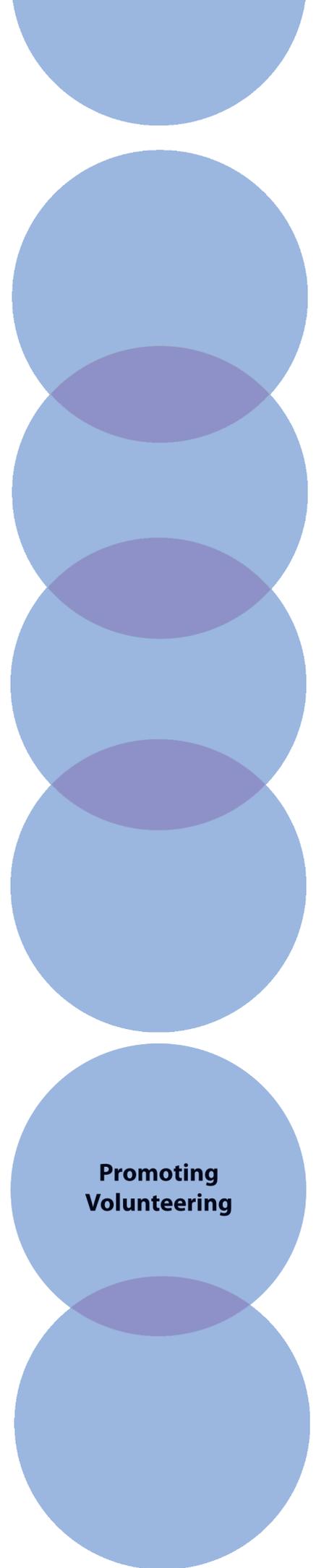


Prisoners and Ex Offenders as Volunteers **toolkit**

A beginner's guide to introducing prisoners
and ex offenders as volunteers into your
volunteering programme

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**Promoting
Volunteering**

INTRODUCTION

This toolkit is designed as a first step to help organisations ensure that their volunteering programme is accessible to prisoners, ex offenders and anyone with criminal convictions. It has been produced by Voluntary Action Leeds (VAL), as part of the VAL Prisoner and Ex Offender Volunteering Project.

What is volunteering?

The relationship between a volunteer and the organisation where they choose to volunteer is a gift relationship; the volunteer is gifting their time to the organisation. It is not a legally binding relationship and volunteers cannot be compelled to commit their time to the organisation or carry out tasks.

Using volunteers is not an alternative to paying employees. Volunteering England, (part of the National Council for Voluntary Organisations) and the Trade Union Congress have created a Charter for Strengthening Relations Between Paid Staff and Volunteers. The Charter sets out a series of principles for employers to follow to encourage a good working relationship between volunteers, employers and paid staff, and can be found at www.tuc.org.uk/workplace-issues/volunteering

Starting to develop your programme

If you do not already have a volunteering programme there is a Volunteering Toolkit designed to help your organisation.

For a copy of the Volunteering Toolkit contact the Volunteer Centre Leeds:

Phone 0113 395 0405

Email volunteering@val.org.uk

or to download a pdf version visit doinggoodleeds.org.uk/toolkits-and-kitemark.html

1. Why use prisoners and ex offenders as volunteers?

There are many reasons for recruiting prisoners and ex offenders as volunteers:

- According to Nacro, the crime prevention charity, almost a quarter of men and women of working age have a criminal record. Excluding people with a criminal record is excluding a significant number of potential volunteers.
- If you currently recruit volunteers into roles which do not require a DBS check you have probably already recruited people with convictions.
- You will be able to increase the diversity of your volunteer base.
- By targeting this group in your recruitment campaign you are demonstrating a commitment to equality and diversity within your organisation.
- Refusing to work with people who have convictions could make your organisation appear discriminatory.
- Being given the trust, responsibility and support that comes with their role can be the turning point they need to change their lives.
- Volunteering is proven to reduce reoffending rates, which in turn reduces crime in the community.
- Prisoners and ex offenders can offer a wealth of skills and experience to an organisation other volunteers wouldn't necessarily have. For instance, a recovered substance user will have a unique insight and credibility, by drawing on their own experience, in a drug counselling role.
- The Prison Service is committed to making prisoners' time serving custodial sentences meaningful. Many people released from prison have used their time to gain qualifications, skills and volunteer in diverse roles of responsibility including listening, managing charitable projects and working in social enterprises.

2. How to recruit prisoners and ex offenders as volunteers

Many organisations don't know where to start when they decide they would like to work with prisoners and ex offenders as volunteers. Here are some tips to help you get started or if you have an established programme to expand your recruitment.

- In Yorkshire, Voluntary Action Leeds (VAL) runs a project that matches people with convictions, including serving prisoners, to volunteering opportunities. To advertise your opportunities with the VAL Prisoners and Ex Offender Volunteering Project email laura.elson@val.org.uk or call 07979 016 466.
- Make links with local prisons and charities working with offenders to advertise your roles. Every prison will have a Head of Resettlement who you could contact.
- Advertise in the local prison visitors' centre.
- Advertise that you have roles specifically available for prisoners and ex offenders, and can offer support.
- Advertise with the local Probation Services.
- Advertise at your local Volunteer Centre that you work with prisoners and ex offenders.

3. Disclosure and Barring Service

The Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) is part of the Home Office and enables organisations to make safer recruitment decisions by identifying candidates who may be unsuitable for certain voluntary or paid roles. In particular roles that involve children or vulnerable adults. The DBS provides wider access to criminal record information, through its disclosure service for England and Wales.

The DBS was formed in 2012 by merging the functions of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) and the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA).

Under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, it is only acceptable to ask someone to declare spent convictions if they will be volunteering with vulnerable people, which includes: children; young people; older people; disabled people; alcohol and drug misusers and the chronically sick.

When you have established your approach with working with volunteers, make sure it is reflected in organisational policies and procedures, and regularly reviewed.

How to make a decision about whether to recruit – step by step:

- First arrange an initial, confidential interview with the potential volunteer. Do they have the essential skills, experience needed, or an ability to develop them?
- If yes, ask them to discuss their criminal convictions. Assure them this is confidential, and consider whether the conviction is relevant to the role, the seriousness of the offence and length of time since the offence occurred. Consider the circumstances, context and behaviour surrounding the offence, and whether the applicant has a pattern of offending behaviour.
- Find out what support exists e.g. family, probation, drug support worker and if they take responsibility for it and recognise the harm they caused. If the volunteer is currently on licence, take appropriate contact details and assess whether you have the resources to support them in line with the licence requirements. If the answers to these questions are reassuring, then the application can proceed.

- References can be taken and comments compared to the DBS check. This is a useful way to assess the level of rehabilitation, and offers a chance for a potential volunteer to prove they can be trusted. If there is a serious discrepancy investigate it before making your decision.
- If you have any doubts, the safest option is not to take on the person on. Try to give an honest and sensitive response. Whilst it is frustrating for potential volunteers you must do what is right for you, but do make sure it is a choice you can defend confidently.

Automatic barring

Under the Protection of Children Act 1999 and Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000, it is an offence to knowingly employ (paid or unpaid) anyone with a conviction for serious crimes against children to work in a 'regulated position', which are roles working with or having responsibility for people under the age of 18 (or for some roles 16). In this instance, the results of a Disclosure automatically determine that a potential volunteer is unsuitable.

4. Risk assessment

When you recruit a volunteer with criminal convictions we recommend you perform a risk assessment, especially if you feel that you may be approached by people with more serious convictions.

Having a risk assessment allows your organisation to safely manage any problems recruiting a prisoner or ex offender may pose. Include information from the questions asked in initial interview including seriousness of the offence, length of sentence, and gain reliable references from the prison or probation if possible.

For more help and examples or what to include in the risk assessment, please contact Volunteer Centre Leeds.

For prisoners on ROTL (Release on Temporary Licence from prison) and those on licence, Probation Services and the appropriate prison will already have extensive risk assessments that are useful to acquire and discuss with an Offender Manager.

5. Supporting prisoners and ex offender volunteers

Once you have recruited volunteers, you need to ensure there are appropriate support structures specific to their needs. People with convictions are a diverse group and should be treated as individuals, on a case by case basis. Unless stipulated as part of their license, they should not be made to disclose any information about their conviction or sentence to other staff and volunteers unless they wish to.

Some people prefer to be upfront about their past and show their progress however most people prefer not to disclose if disclosure is not required, in order to avoid judgement and be treated fairly.

Although you may be highly invested, it's important that everyone else who will be working in your organisation is informed and included to minimise any prejudice or mistreatment.

Here are some tips:

- Work with staff and trustees to ensure that policies, procedures and risk assessments include prisoners and ex offenders, and include as many people as possible in this process.
- Give staff and volunteers an opportunity to ask questions.
- Advertise your commitment to working with people with convictions as part of your commitment to equality and diversity.
- Encourage volunteers to attend meetings, lead on small projects and work with staff and volunteers to get to know them as a person and see their strengths and talents.
- Offer training and support to staff and volunteers new to working with prisoners and ex offenders.
- Celebrate the volunteer's achievements to show people what they are capable of.

6. Supporting newly or temporarily released prisoners

Being released from prison is challenging and can be a vulnerable time. Up to 78% of people released from prison will reoffend within one year of being released. There are many reasons for this including: poverty; homelessness; the breakdown of family ties and a lack of work or activities to occupy their time.

Volunteering is a powerful way to prevent reoffending because it provides a sense of value and purpose. It enhances skills and employability, and gives the chance to meet new people and make new positive relationships, whilst providing a structure, routine and something to focus on.

For prisoners on Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), the opportunity to leave prison each day, and experience a working day is both a chance to return to a normal life and a reward for of a great deal of hard work. Prisoners who are deemed safe, and have used their time in prison to the fullest, taking on responsibility and supporting others have to go through a gruelling process to be awarded ROTL.

Voluntary Action Leeds has produced a guide on ROTL for prisoners and for volunteer managers. For a copy please contact Volunteer Centre Leeds.

"I personally have gained so much support and guidance from the team, and the project has made me see that I am capable of so much more than I originally thought, I have positive role models in my life and am always introduced to other members of the project and other organisations as an equal. The experience has boosted my confidence and given me new skills"

Voluntary Action Leeds ROTL volunteer

7. Expenses

People often have concerns around expenses for volunteers with convictions. It's important to treat them as you would any volunteer such as reimbursing a bus ticket or lunch. If the volunteer is a serving prisoner, it's important to discuss this with your contact at their prison, as the prison should cover the costs.

You are under no legal obligation to pay any expenses to volunteers. However, we would strongly encourage that you reimburse, where you are able, reasonable expenses for costs incurred. This will encourage a more diverse range of people to volunteer at your organisation (not just people who can afford it). Often this will simply be paying someone's bus fare to their place of volunteering or reimbursing their lunch costs.

This could make the difference to someone, allowing them to volunteer, when wouldn't ordinarily be able to, and you could get that excellent volunteer that you've been hoping for.

It is important for you as an organisation to only ever pay expenses that the volunteer has paid themselves; flat rates for expenses or any money over could have legal implications for yourself and the volunteer.

If you need advice on creating an expenses policy please refer to the Volunteering Toolkit. For your copy contact Volunteer Centre Leeds: call 0113 395 0405, email volunteering@val.org.uk

8. Prison categories

The Criminal Justice System is the set of agencies and processes managed by the Government to control crime and penalise those who violate the law. This includes the police; Crown Prosecution Service; the courts; prisons; probation service and the youth justice board in England and Wales. A criminal record can range from as little as a caution to a life sentence. Prisoners are assigned different categories according to age and gender.

Prisoner Category/Status	Male prisoners (21+)	Female prisoners (21+)
<i>Considered dangerous to the public and should only volunteer in organisations with experience and training.</i>	Category A	Restricted Status
<i>Covers a wide range of offences which do not require maximum security. Screening will provide a number who would be suitable for volunteering.</i>	Category B	Closed
<i>Lower security imposed. Screening will provide a number who would be suitable for volunteering.</i>	Category C	Semi-open
<i>Minimum security or open status. These prisoners are very low risk, trusted and are often given temporary release to be with family, work, study or volunteer.</i>	Category D	Open

Fewer women serve in custody in prisons than men, in the UK 20% of those arrested, and 5% of those convicted are female. Research suggests women are less likely to offend, however since women are more likely to volunteer you may find it easier to recruit female prisoners and ex offenders.

9. Young offenders as volunteers

For young people with a criminal record, both their age and offence can hold them back, and volunteering can be the turning point they need that steers them away from crime.

There is no legal restriction on volunteering by children in non profit organisations. However the Children and Young Person's Act is a useful guideline, and limits children aged 14 to 16 to a maximum of two hours work per day, not to be in school hours.

Voluntary Action Leeds (VAL) has produced a Young volunteers toolkit that provides a beginner's guide to working with young volunteers, which could help you get started.

VAL is also piloting a new volunteering project for young offenders in partnership with Her Majesty's Young Offender Institution Wetherby and Leeds Metropolitan University. For information email laura.elson@val.org.uk

Top Tips:

- Screening and assessment are crucial, not all young people are ready to volunteer, and you need to make assessments of their skills, attitude, support needs, offence and potential to develop.
- Check that your insurance policy covers work with young people, many insurance policies classes an adult as 16, but the age can be reduced with the insurance company to ensure you are safe.
- Make sure that your role description is realistic and accurate, so that young people can see exactly what they will be doing in a clear way.
- Induction and training needs to be very comprehensive, engaging and preferably highly interactive training.
- Regular supervision is essential, take into account how the volunteer is doing, any sentence or court order stipulations and additional support needs. Each young volunteer should have a named supervisor in the staff team.

- Organisations working with young people should have a robust safeguarding and Child Protection Policy in place as well as clear procedures.
- If you need any advice relating to safeguarding young volunteers
- you can contact Leeds Safeguarding Children Board on 0113 395 0247 or email children.leeds@leeds.gov.uk



This toolkit is a starting point for organisations looking to introduce prisoners and ex offenders as volunteers into their volunteering programme. For more in-depth advice and support contact Volunteer Centre Leeds. The internet is a valuable resource for researching and downloading information. Your local library can offer you free internet access if this is not available at your home or place of work.

CHECKLIST

- Recruitment of ex offenders policy
- Health and safety policy
- Named volunteer manager/supervisor at your organisation
- Volunteer roles
- Induction
- Volunteer Policy
- Safeguarding policy
- Risk assessment
- Training and information to challenge any staff prejudices.

Useful contacts

Nacro

A crime reduction charity which supports ex-offenders and their families www.nacro.org.uk/

Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS)

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/disclosure-and-barring-service/about

Volunteering England

www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice

www.volunteering.org.uk/isabriefing

Doing Good Leeds

For advice, support and training visit doinggoodleeds.org.uk

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Voluntary Action Leeds (VAL)
Stringer House
34 Lupton Street
Leeds LS10 2QW
Registered Charity 225863
Company Ltd by Guarantee 555150