

Vetting volunteers: why it's important and tips for doing it



Many volunteer organisations work with vulnerable people. It's important to protect both these people and volunteers against any risks to their well-being and safety. Volunteering can impact the public and the volunteer-involving organisation as a whole too. Given all of this, it's important to carry out suitable background checks on potential volunteers. Here we detail some suggestions on how you might go about this.

The purpose of background checks is not to make it more difficult for people with criminal convictions to find meaningful volunteering. It is important to be aware that people with criminal convictions and histories do face real prejudices in finding work, including voluntary work. However, it is also important to recognise that it may be inappropriate to recruit people who have displayed anti-social behaviours into roles where they will work with children and other vulnerable people. Effective background checks can help to ensure the safety of your service recipients, your organisations staff and its reputation.

Why do background checks on applicants for volunteering?

- To safeguard the reputation of your organisation, this rests on the trust and confidence that your service users have in your organisation, including the volunteers
- To ensure to the best of your ability, the safety of your service users by running background checks on potential volunteers
- To ensure to the best of your ability, the safety of your organisations staff that have exposure to potential volunteers
- By running background checks on potential volunteers, you can assess their overall suitability for work in your organisation

We suggest that you ensure you have a proper procedure in place for dealing with background checks, rather than doing them in an ad hoc way. It's best not to wait for a crisis to happen before you check if your vetting procedures are adequate.

Different organisations will need different procedures for vetting. How thorough the vetting needs to be will depend on what roles volunteers fill and what the potential risks are to service user's well-being and safety. It could be useful to undertake a risk assessment of the volunteer role as well, and to establish a system to negate these risks before recruitment.

If your organisation works with children, elderly people or other vulnerable people, you may need to have extra-thorough vetting procedures. If volunteers are doing work that does not see them interacting with service users, a thorough background check may not be as necessary. Although carrying out background checks might be time-consuming and expensive, it is worth doing them properly to minimise any risk to your service users, your staff and your organisation.

What kind of background checks can I do?

There are many different background checks that you can do. There is no single, full-proof form of vetting that will give you a complete picture of a person. It is likely that you will want to use a mixture of vetting procedures, some of which are outlined below. Carrying out a range of vetting procedures may help you to build a consistent picture of the applicant and to check any claims they make.

You will also need to identify what the risks to your service users are so you know what you need to look for in carrying out background checks. For example, if your organisation works with children, you may want to check volunteers' backgrounds for any offences relating to sexual offences or child abuse. It is also important that the person undertaking the reference checks has knowledge about child protection and knows what to look for.

Below are some examples of background checks. These checks are designed to look for different information (e.g. criminal convictions or opinions of others about the applicant) and require a different amount of time and resources to carry out. This list is not exhaustive but gives you an indication of the type of checks you could carry out.

- 1. Request a Police vetting check.** Police vetting is a common way to check information held about a person on the Police's database, such as criminal convictions or a family violence report. The applicant must provide written consent for an organisation to request a Police vetting check. The Police may also provide information relating to any violent behaviours of the person being vetted, which may not have resulted in a conviction, as well as information about any interactions with the Police.

You should also be aware that under Criminal Records (Clean Slate) Act 2004, a person may be allowed to conceal their criminal record if they meet certain criteria. These criteria include requiring that the person has completed a rehabilitation period and that the person has not been given a custodial (i.e. prison) sentence¹. If a person is eligible under the scheme, their record is wiped "clean". This means that they can say they do not have any convictions on their Ministry of Justice or Police check.

You can register for vetting applications [here](#)

- 2. Obtain a criminal record.** A Police vetting check is not a criminal record check, so you may also want to request a criminal record through the Ministry of Justice, often known as an MoJ check. As a third party, you can seek the applicant's permission to view their criminal record. You can do this at [this link](#). Note that at present, this is a manual paper form process but the Ministry of Justice is aiming for this process to be all online from May 2021 (find out more on their website [here](#)).
- 3. Check the applicant's references.** You could ask the applicant to provide contact details for referees (it is standard to ask for two referees). Referees should not be family members or partners of the applicant and should have known the applicant for a minimum period (e.g. two years). It may be helpful for you to establish a standardised process for carrying out reference checks and having a list of questions for referees ready. You should consider what questions are relevant for you to ask.
- 4. Check information publicly available about the applicant online.** You may wish to do an internet search on the applicant to see what information about the applicant is available online. Sources of information could be social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Bear in mind though that the internet can also be a source of misinformation, so what you learn could be indicative only.
- 5. Undertake a group assessment.** If necessary, it may be useful to carry out a group interview to develop an even deeper understanding of the applicants.

It is important to design a vetting procedure that is appropriate for your organisation and your service users, and the type of work carried out by your volunteers. It may not be necessary for you to carry out all of the vetting procedures above.

How will I know if an applicant is suitable for a volunteer role?

It is ultimately up to you or your organisation to decide whether a person is suitable for a volunteer role in your organisation. There is no single characteristic or set of characteristics that makes an applicant unsuitable for volunteer work. As mentioned above, it is important for you to be clear about what potential risks exist and what types of anti-social behaviour might increase those risks. In considering a criminal record for example, you may want to think about the relevance of the applicant's offence to the volunteer position, the seriousness of that offence and any patterns of offending.

It is important to ensure that your organisation has a systematic way for dealing with background checks of applicants. In this way, you will protect your service users and your employees, as well as the reputation of your organisation and brand.

¹ See the full criteria for eligibility under the clean slate scheme, see Criminal Records (Clean Slate) Act 2004, s 7.