

Safeguarding and confidentiality within youth volunteering

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Brook is the UK's leading voluntary sector provider of sexual health and wellbeing services for young people under 25.

As a young people's organisation, with a commitment to participation, we've made a real effort to engage with young volunteers at all levels of the organisation, from reception right up to our Board of Trustees.

We have plenty of experience of actively and meaningfully engaging young people in volunteering and social action and have a lot of experience in both safeguarding and confidentiality that we'd like to share with you.

Safeguarding and confidentiality go hand in hand, and there is often a balancing act between a young person's right to confidentiality and an organisation's duty to protect young volunteers from harm. Coupled with this you also have a responsibility to ensure that your young volunteers understand their duty of confidentiality towards your clients/patients/beneficiaries, and that they are not put at risk of harm by the involvement of young volunteers.

At Brook, we have two distinct policies: one on safeguarding and one on confidentiality. But neither can be viewed in isolation.

So why are safeguarding and confidentiality so important? They keep your volunteers safe, they keep your clients safe, strong safeguarding and confidentiality policies create a culture of trust between services and young people, and of course the rights to privacy (confidentiality) and to be kept safe are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We recently did some work with our young volunteers to find out what safeguarding and confidentiality means to them. They told us that it's about safety, risk, protection, consent, privacy and choice. And importantly they also said that it's about being respected as a person. I think that's really interesting, because it's easy for us as professionals to think that safeguarding and confidentiality are things that we have to do because of legal and regulatory frameworks, or to 'protect' young people – but they see it as being about respect and empowerment.

***Think about what safeguarding means to your organisation.
Now think about what confidentiality means to your organisation.***

Planning: policy and procedure

For us at Brook, safeguarding and confidentiality run through everything we do. So I'm going to take you through the key stages of youth volunteer engagement and explain how to ensure that safeguarding and confidentiality remains the golden thread tying everything together.

Let's start with planning your programme.

Before you actually start doing anything with young volunteers, it's really important that you have correct policies and procedures in place that are appropriate for your organisation.

It's important to develop a volunteer involvement policy. And ensure that you specifically include safeguarding and confidentiality within that. A good volunteer involvement policy should explain any special policies or procedures such as child protection, safeguarding, and considerations for young volunteers.

Young people's involvement in policy

At Brook, as part of our commitment to young people's participation, linked to Article 12 of the UNCRC – that all children and young people have the right to be involved in important decision making that affects them, we always ensure that young people are involved in developing or reviewing policy and procedure.

We worked with our youth forum to review our client safeguarding and confidentiality policies and our adult volunteering policy assess which areas would map across to working with young volunteers and where there were distinctions. Involving young people at the earliest possible opportunity is really useful, because it ensures that they are able to engage meaningfully in the process.

Working collaboratively with young people will also help you to ensure that your policies are written in plain English that is easy to understand. You can't expect young people to work to policies that are full of jargon and incomprehensible to professionals. Most young people will be perfectly capable of understanding organisational policies and procedures as long as they are explained in clearly and in plain English.

No one engages well with jargon filled policies. One of my favourite sayings is “if you get it right for young people, you get it right for everyone else”.

When creating your policy, you might want to consider issues like:

- What if a young volunteer is a client, or ex-client? Will your responsibilities to them be different from a young person who had never accessed your services? How will you ensure that their client records remain separate from their volunteer file? Or is it important within the context of your organisation for the two to be linked? What ever your decision, it's very important that you have clear rationale and you can explain your policy in simple, young people friendly language.
- You need to be really clear about whether your young volunteers are classed as part of your 'workforce' or as your patients, clients or beneficiaries. Adult volunteers usually get classed as part of the 'workforce' however you will need to tailor any existing volunteering policies to include your 'duty of care' to young volunteers under the age of 18. Ideally involve young volunteers in the development of this policy, perhaps through a collaborative workshop or focus group.

What are some special considerations for your organisation?

It's important to explain the policy to your young volunteers and check that they understand it.

Never just give young people your safeguarding and confidentiality policies and expect them to read, digest, and understand how to implement them. You might, however, wish to create a young people friendly or 'easy read' version of your policies. Brook has a number of policies and procedures which have been re-written, in partnership with young people, to be easy for anyone to understand.

Creating clear volunteer roles

It's really important that you use the same good practice with your young volunteers as you would with your adult volunteers. This includes having a really clear role description and volunteer agreement that explains their rights and responsibilities around confidentiality and safeguarding as well as your duty to them. Having this in place at the start makes it easier if you do have difficulties later on, because you have formal agreements that you can reference and return to.

Be very clear in your role description about the boundaries, as well as the skills and attributes required – it is really important in order to safeguard both the volunteer and the patients/clients/beneficiaries that you're confident that they will be able to volunteer well and safely in that environment.

Identifying and managing risk

It's important to have a clear role description so that you can do a thorough risk assessment which includes any potential psychological risks, as well as physical risks. At Brook, we also conduct individual 'support needs assessments' with each volunteer during the selection process, to find out about any sensitivities, triggers or emotional or mental health needs.

It's important to risk assess each role that you consider developing, and decide whether it is appropriate for a young person.

When engaging with young people in health and social care settings, it is important to consider the psychological and emotional impact that they may be exposed to. For example; seeing a person their own age or younger with a terminal illness; being exposed to a violent or abusive patient; seeing a person with a traumatic injury. Whilst these may be infrequent or rare in different settings, they may be more common in others and so care needs to be taken when deciding the appropriateness of placements and the support available to young volunteers¹.

Ensure that, as part of this planning process, you are taking into consideration whether individuals will be supporting vulnerable adults or other young people, and as such ensure that you have the appropriate policies in place for this, risk assessments, and also clarification of the level of DBS required (if indeed it is required, or legally obtainable – under 16s cannot have DBS checks made on them).²

Identify one key risk for your organisation around youth volunteering. Think about how you could reduce or mitigate that risk.

¹ Extract from Volunteering Matters Toolkit: <http://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/report/toolkit-youth-social-action-in-health-and-social-care/>

² Extract from Volunteering Matters Toolkit: <http://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/report/toolkit-youth-social-action-in-health-and-social-care/>

If your role or setting, or the young person is deemed to be high risk, and you are not able to reduce the level of risk then you'll need to consider whether the opportunity should take place. You could instead consider alternative roles for young people, or signpost individuals on to other volunteer involving organisations.

Some young people may not be aware of their individual triggers or levels of resilience. Therefore, if your role or setting is deemed as medium risk it will be very important to build in regular one-to-one debriefs (for example at the end of each session) as well as regular support and supervision.

If your volunteering opportunity is medium risk, then it's important that you ensure that anyone who has been affected by their volunteering can have access to welfare services if necessary. These might be your staff welfare services, or for example at Brook we ensure that our young volunteers have access to our specialist counsellors if needed.

As a result of your risk assessment, you might decide that your policy will be that no one under 18 volunteers on their own, without a member of staff or an experienced adult volunteer supervising them. This is something that we always ensure at Brook and is good practice in terms of protecting your volunteers, AND protecting your patients/clients/beneficiaries.

You might need to build in additional support and supervision to ensure that any potential safeguarding or confidentiality issues are identified early, and can therefore be managed more safely and effectively.

Remember that staff or volunteers who are supervising young volunteers will need to be DBS checked. And, depending on whether the role meets the definition of 'regulated activity' you may also need to DBS check the volunteers too (aged 16+).

In addition to ensuring that those who are supporting young volunteers are DBS checked, you also need to make sure that they have the knowledge, skills and experience to adequately support young volunteers and are able to identify safeguarding concerns and areas of risk.

Recruitment and selection

Now, young people under the age of 16 cannot be DBS checked. We also find that most young people under 18 also don't have very strong references. So, it's really important to have very robust recruitment and selection processes.

Whilst the vast majority of volunteers are doing so because they have incredibly positive motivations, remember that young people can still be abusers. This might include young people who want to abuse vulnerable older people, children or even their peers. Robust recruitment and selection procedures can help to mitigate that risk.

Developing a recruitment strategy will help you to ensure that you're approaching confidentiality and safeguarding from all angles.

Application forms

Remember that if you are engaging young people under the age of 18, it is good practice to get parental permission, as long as this does not conflict with their right to confidentiality. For young people under 16 there is a duty to do this from a health and safety perspective too.

Can you think of an example where parental permission might conflict with a young person's right to confidentiality?

Application forms should include a request for references (good practice is two). This can be challenging for young people as they may not have any references other than their teachers. Teachers may be unable to comment on anything other than the young person's academic ability, so it's important that your reference request form includes specific questions about the young person's suitability for the post, for example "is there anything that makes you think they might not be suitable to volunteer in this environment or with this group of people?", "What skills/attitudes/qualities does the young person have that makes you think they would be suitable to volunteer in this environment or with this group of people?"

You can also ask specific questions of young people at the application stage, particularly around their motivations for wanting to volunteer with your organisation or client group, their understanding of confidentiality and safeguarding, and identifying any personal vulnerabilities about themselves.

Can you think of a very specific question that you could include on your application form or reference request form that could help you assess levels of risk from a confidentiality and safeguarding perspective?

Interviews

Interviews are a great opportunity for you to think about confidentiality and safeguarding.

You can assess the young person's individual level of maturity and understanding, or their potential to understand the principles of confidentiality and safeguarding. You can also use it as an opportunity to assess individual's suitability for the role environment based on their vulnerabilities.

Make sure that your recruitment processes are young people friendly – this might be the first time that they have ever been interviewed, so it's important to manage your own expectations.

They might not be familiar with the words 'confidentiality' or 'safeguarding' so you might need to think about creative ways to assess their understanding of these concepts. You'll also be trying to assess their capability, or potential, to understand confidentiality and safeguarding once training has been provided.

How might you explain confidentiality and safeguarding without using those words?

Include scenario based questions to help you understand the young person's motivations, strengths and resilience factors, and their awareness of their triggers.

Some organisations use the Warner Interview Technique to discern the motivations for wanting to volunteer with vulnerable groups.

At Brook, we use scenario based questions to help us understand the attitudes, values, motivations and resilience of prospective volunteers. We follow up by explaining what the 'perfect' answer would have been from a Brook perspective if, for example, their values do not align or they do not demonstrate an understanding of boundaries, because this can be a learning opportunity for the young people too. We can then assess whether they are suitable for the opportunity. Remember that it's very important to feel able to turn away potential volunteers who you don't feel have the values and attitudes required.

Can you think of a scenario based question that would be appropriate for your organisation to help you assess risks around confidentiality and safeguarding?

Assessing risks and needs

At Brook, we have support needs assessments for young volunteers, plus a health and safety risk assessment (which must be signed by parents if under 16).

You should consider the roles each young volunteer will carry out and the maturity of each young person to be able to handle any psychologically demanding or emotional situations which they encounter, for example, with palliative care, on cancer wards, or in intensive care wards. Emotional support will be required in these roles, and you should consider whether you can provide that – if not, you should match young volunteers to alternative roles.³

You'll also need to consider your organisations tolerance to vulnerabilities – for example mental health. If a young volunteer will be providing peer support or mentoring to younger people around mental health and emotional wellbeing, you'll need a policy on whether you're happy to take on volunteers who are still accessing services, or whether you're going to state a specific length of time since discharge or from being a mental health service user, for example, or will you ask for a reference from a relevant mental health professional who has been responsible for their care?

Young volunteers who have experience of accessing services themselves may be very well placed to provide an empathetic peer support service, but only if they are coming from a positive place. Think carefully about how you will ensure boundaries are maintained between a young person who has previously been a services user to becoming a volunteer.

³ Extract from Volunteering Matters Toolkit: <http://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/report/toolkit-youth-social-action-in-health-and-social-care/>

Training

It's really important that induction and training includes confidentiality and safeguarding, delivered in young people friendly, jargon free, engaging manner. Remember that the concepts of confidentiality and safeguarding may be new to young people. Don't make assumptions about existing levels of knowledge and understanding – check! Use creative activities to ensure that your policies are 'real' for young people, and include practical examples of how they are implemented in practice.

Wherever possible, try to involve young volunteers in developing the training. This will ensure that your training is young people friendly, engaging and relatable. Ensure that your training caters to the needs of a range of different learning styles too.

At Brook, our young volunteers receive not only our standard safeguarding and confidentiality training, but we also have supplementary activities which have been developed collaboratively with young people. These additional safeguarding and confidentiality training activities are fun, engaging, cater for a range of different learning styles and give real, practical examples of what our policies mean in practice, supporting the volunteers to understand how they are implemented in their roles.

At Brook, for some roles, we use the training as an additional selection stage, as observing individuals *within a learning and team work environment gives you an insight into how they inter-relate, provides you with a good indication of any gaps in their skills and knowledge, and gives them an opportunity to explore whether the role and environment is right for them*⁴.

*Training should be considered an ongoing activity for volunteers, both because many young volunteers will be motivated by this and because it will ensure your volunteers are competent in their roles and up to date with any changes*⁵. Complex issues such as confidentiality and safeguarding may need reinforcing and reiterating several times and in several different ways, catering for different learning styles.

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Peer support settings

In a peer support setting it's really important that your young volunteers understand that they are still in a position of trust. At Brook, we've found that some young people can struggle to understand that in their volunteering role they still have to maintain strong professional boundaries even with their peers. Using scenario based training activities can be helpful, and explaining the answer if they get it wrong too! They may never have had professional boundaries explained to them, so check and re-check as part of their volunteer development plan as necessary.

Ongoing Support and Supervision

It's important to have a support and supervision framework for your young volunteers, as they may require more support than your adult volunteers. You'll need to be sure that you're able to provide the level of support required before you engage with young volunteers.

Support and supervision sessions should be held regularly and ensure that safeguarding and confidentiality is always on the agenda.

Make sure that you record support and supervision with your young volunteers, and particularly how you manage any early warning signs of confidentiality or safeguarding issues that might arise. You could do this by writing notes that you keep in their volunteer file or you could use a template.

If your young volunteers require debriefs, then make sure they get them – especially when supporting volunteers in traumatic environments such as palliative care, and intensive care units or wards⁶.

Consider including a probationary period, which includes regular assessments and support/supervision.

Ongoing support and supervision

As well as having formal approaches to support and supervision, you might also want to compliment this by having more informal buddying relationships, perhaps with slightly older or more experienced volunteers. The most important thing to remember is that everyone who is providing any level of support or supervision to young volunteers must be able to identify the early warning signs of safeguarding concerns or confidentiality issues, and know how to manage those or how to escalate appropriately.

⁶ Extract from Volunteering Matters Toolkit: <http://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/report/toolkit-youth-social-action-in-health-and-social-care/>