

Health and safety for community groups

Introduction to health and safety for community groups run by volunteers.

This information is for organisations that don't have any employees or control any premises. It includes tips and ideas for keeping people well and safe at your events and activities, information on how and why to write a health and safety policy, and some sample policies.

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Please note that organisations that employ people, or control premises, have different legal responsibilities. For further help contact the Health and Safety Executive¹.

Real health and safety for small groups

What is health and safety?

Health and safety is a term that is often associated with red tape and not being able to do the things you want to do. However, paying attention to health and safety in your activities shouldn't stop you from running them – in fact, it should make them more enjoyable and accessible for people.

Health and safety in a community group means all the ways that you and your group think about the welfare of volunteers, members, participants, and the general public. It is about working together as a group to make sure you have done everything you can to prevent avoidable accidents and protect people from getting hurt.

Practical steps for small groups

What can you do to avoid accidents?

When you are planning activities, meetings or events, discuss within your group steps you can take to avoid people getting hurt. It is useful to consider:

The place the activity will take place

Are there any hazards that you could remove or warn people about? For example:

- ♦ You have hired a room for a coffee morning. When you arrive, you find there are some boxes just inside the door. You might decide to move these out of the way so that people don't trip over them as they come in.
- ♦ Your group is organising a street party. There is a large pot hole the street. You might decide to put up a little fence or rope around the pothole, and a sign warning people, to help ensure nobody trips and falls in it during the party

The people who will be taking part

Do the participants have any particular needs that would make them more likely to hurt themselves? For example:

- ♦ You regularly run a jumble sale, but this month you know there is a party coming from a local retirement home. You might decide to provide extra chairs so that the larger number of elderly people will be able to sit down if they need to.
- ♦ You run a regular bingo evening in your community hall. Your group has decided to run a one-off children's bingo session, in the same venue. You might decide to have a look around to see if there is any "child-proofing" you could do to the hall, such as removing heavy or breakable items that children might pull over onto themselves.

The equipment that you will use

Are there checks you could do to make sure that the equipment is in good working order? Do people need any particular skills or knowledge to enable them to use it safely? For example:

- ♦ You use a hot water boiler every week at your coffee morning. You might decide to check the cable and plug each week before you use it, to make sure there are no bare wires or burnt patches.
- ♦ Your group maintains the gardens in your estate. You have bought an electric lawnmower for volunteers to use. You might decide to make sure that anyone who will be using it understands how it works, and the precautions they need to take to keep themselves and others safe when using it. You could get some of this information from the instruction manual that comes with the lawnmower.

The activity itself

Is there anything about the activity you are running that could lead to someone becoming injured? Could you change the activity to reduce this risk, or give people information that will help them to keep themselves safer? For example:

- ♦ Your group runs weekly hill and mountain walks. You have planned a walk along a coastal path, which includes a section along a cliff edge. The walk is very beautiful, so you don't want to change the route. Instead, before you reach the cliff edge section, you warn the participants that it is coming up and that they should take care to keep away from the edge.
- ♦ Your group is planning an exercise class for your members. You know that quite a few of your members have medical conditions such as bad backs and arthritis. To make sure the activity is suitable, you find a teacher who is able to run gentle activities for people with limited movement.

Write down the decisions you make so that you can refer to them later. If, in exceptional circumstances, you need to provide evidence that you have taken care to avoid people becoming injured, having a written record of your decisions can help. You could either take note of your decisions in the minutes of the meeting in which you have the discussion, or as a separate risk assessment. See our information sheets *Risk Assessments* and *Taking Minutes* for more help.

How can you help keep people well and comfortable?

Health and safety is not just about avoiding accidents. It is also about making sure people have what they need to stay well. Think about what you will need to provide to make sure that people who are affected by your activities are well taken care of.

For example, if you are running an event that people will be at for several hours, it is important to make sure there are toilet facilities and drinking water available. Make sure your venue isn't too hot or cold, and that there is adequate space to comfortably accommodate the people who will be coming. If there are things people will need that you are not providing, it is useful to include this in your publicity. For example, if your activity goes over lunchtime and you are not catering, invite people to bring a packed lunch.

Do volunteers need any training?

In the day to day running of your group, you will probably find that you already have the information you need to judge whether something is unnecessarily dangerous. For example, you don't need any specialist knowledge to tell that a pile of boxes just inside a door could be a trip hazard! However, there may be some cases in which more information than just "common sense" is needed to run an activity as safely as possible.

There may be activities that your group would like to organise that require specialist knowledge and skills in order to keep it as safe as possible. If you do not have anyone in your group who has this specialist knowledge, you will need to either organise training for an existing member, or find a new volunteer who is competent to run the activity.

For example, imagine you are a school PTA and would like to encourage more children to cycle to school. You decide to organise a group bike ride from a local estate to the school each day. Although you have several volunteers who are experienced cyclists, no-one has any expertise in running group rides for children. You decide to send two of your volunteers on a training course in leading bike rides. When they come back, they have good ideas about improving the safety of the activity.

What will you do if there is an accident?

It is useful to have an agreement about who is responsible for taking charge in an emergency situation. This could be one named individual all the time, or a different person could be appointed for different activities (e.g. you could decide that the Secretary will be responsible at a committee meeting, but the Events Officer will be responsible at larger events).

If you organise events or activities, it is also a good idea to have trained first aiders. It is sensible, if possible, to train more than one person, so that there is likely to always be one trained person available. You may decide that there are certain types of activity at which you will ensure that there is always a first aider present.

When an accident happens, it is important to keep a record that you can refer to later if you need to. You should keep an accident book, where you write down every accident, who was hurt, how they were hurt, and what you did to treat them (if anything).

Fire safety

If you regularly use the same venue, you could adopt a set of regular procedures for checking fire safety. These could include checking that fire exits and escape routes are clear, that smoke alarms are working, and that fire extinguishers are present. If you use different venues, you could agree a set of requirements you have, such as that all venues must have smoke alarms, clearly labelled fire exits and fire extinguishers.

It is also very sensible, if possible, to ask people to put their name on a list as they enter a building, and cross it out when they leave. This way, if there is a fire at your event, you have a list of people who are at your event, and can check whether everybody has been evacuated safely.

Equipment

If you use electrical equipment, you might want to consider adopting a procedure for checking its safety, such as always checking the cables, plugs and connections for bare wires, frayed cables, burnt patches etc before use.

In general, it is important to think about whether you have any equipment that could be hazardous if not used correctly, and put processes in place for ensuring it is used by a competent person.

Dangerous Substances

If you use any dangerous substances, you should ensure that they are used appropriately and are stored safely. More information about Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (CoSHH) is available from the Health and Safety Executive¹.

Responsibilities

You need to know who has overall responsibility for health and safety in your group. In most cases, this will be your management committee, as they are legally responsible for the actions of your group.

However, you may wish to delegate day to day responsibility to a particular person or group of people. It is useful to know that somebody has the specific job of thinking about health and safety, and ensuring the committee's decisions are put in place. For example, if you have decided to always check fire exits at your meetings, it is more efficient to decide that one or two people will do this at every meeting than everybody thinking about it. This also helps to ensure it doesn't get missed out and forgotten.

Getting the balance right

When you start thinking about health and safety, it is easy to become anxious about everything that could possibly go wrong. It is important to remember that people are used to taking risks in order to take part in interesting things. When someone comes along to a football training session, it is because they want to play football. It is fair to

assume that they understand there is some risk inherently involved, and that they might end up with some bruises!

What you need to do is make sure you avoid *unnecessary* risk. So, when someone comes along to your football training, they could reasonably expect to get a minor injury in the course of playing the game. However, if you are using goal posts that are unstable, and they fall and injure someone, this is something that you could easily have avoided whilst still running a perfectly good football session. The person who has come along to your activity could have reasonably expected not to be hit by a falling goal post. You should check the equipment is safe to use before the activity begins.

Similarly, those of you who work for the organisation, albeit in a voluntary capacity, have a responsibility to each other to help make sure you can go about your voluntary duties without *undue* risk of injury.

Health and safety and the law

The main piece of formal legislation that sets out health and safety requirements in law is the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974. This governs legal health and safety requirements for any organisation that uses any paid workers or controls any premises. It contains specific requirements aimed at protecting people who are doing paid work. This includes, “as far as is reasonably practicable”, providing:

- ♦ safe equipment;
- ♦ safe substances;
- ♦ necessary information, instruction, supervision and training;
- ♦ a safe and healthy workplace;
- ♦ a safe and healthy working environment.

If your group is responsible for a building or room, or has any part time or full time paid workers, you will be subject to the requirements of the Act, and failing to meet them could be a criminal offence. The Health and Safety Executive also “strongly recommend” that organisations make sure their volunteers are protected in the same ways.

This sheet is aimed at groups who do not employ people or control premises. Groups who are legally subject to the Health and Safety at Work etc Act should make sure they fully understand their obligations. The Health and Safety Executive¹ is a good place to start.

Groups who do not have paid workers or control premises still have a general legal responsibility to take care not to cause injury to people. In the eyes of the law, your group has a duty of care to group members and others who may be affected by your activities, which means you need to do what you can to protect people from harm. It is a good idea to keep a record of what you have done, in case you ever have to prove that you have taken care to avoid accidents.

Regulated activities

Certain activities are subject to additional specific regulations which govern whether you need any particular qualification to run them, and whether you need a licence or to be registered with a regulating body.

Some childcare provision must be registered with Ofsted¹, and some work with children and vulnerable adults, including voluntary roles, must be done by someone who has had an enhanced criminal record check (Disclosure and Barring Service² check). See our sheets *Running a Crèche* and *Using the Disclosure and Barring Service* for more information.

If you are providing food and drink, you have a general responsibility to ensure that it is safe to eat and complies with the requirements of the Food Safety Act. In some circumstances you may need to register with the local authority. See our information sheet *Licensing and regulations for events*.

If you are planning to run adventure activities, such as climbing, trekking, caving or water sports, you may need a licence. Contact the Adventure Activity Licensing Authority³ for more information.

Public Liability Insurance

You may wish to take out public liability insurance. See our information sheet *Public Liability* for more help with this.

Health and safety policies and risk assessments

In this section we look at the different written documents that groups sometimes adopt, what they are useful for, and how to write them.

Do we need a health and safety policy?

If your group has taken the time to sit down and make decisions about what you will do to help keep people safe and well, it is sensible to write down these decisions. This will mean you can refer to them in future, and don't have to keep reinventing the wheel. It also means that, should something go wrong, you have a clear agreement about what you will do. A health and safety policy is your group's written record of the decisions and agreements you have made.

Any policy will only be useful to your group if you actually intend to do the things you put in it! To make this work, it needs to be relevant to your group, simple and comprehensive enough for all your volunteers and committee members to use, and updated regularly enough to make sure it continues to reflect the way your group wants to run things.

Sometimes, you may find you need to provide a copy of a health and safety policy to a third party, such as a funder or insurance company. It can be tempting to just get one "off the shelf", put your group's name on it and adopt it as your policy. However, your policy will be much more useful to you if you write it based on your group's real life situation and real life decisions. Having a policy that you don't actually use or is

¹ ofsted.gov.uk

² gov.uk/dbs

³ hse.gov.uk/aala

not accurate can also cause difficulty if something does go wrong. This is because your health and safety policy is one of the ways you can prove you have thought about health and safety, and if you are not following your own policy it is harder to show you are meeting your duty of care.

What shall we put in our health and safety policy?

A health and safety policy sets out a groups' general agreements about health and safety. It usually includes a statement of the groups' intention to maintain a safe and healthy environment, a clear outline of who is responsible for ensuring this is done, and any general arrangements that apply to all activities, such as, for example:

- ♦ the decision to have a trained first aider present at all public events;
- ♦ a commitment to making sure volunteers have any necessary training to run activities as safely as possible;
- ♦ a decision to ensure that any electrical equipment the group uses is checked for safety before use;
- ♦ a commitment that you will undertake a risk assessment of all activities;
- ♦ reference to any other related documents, such as a safeguarding and child protection policy.

Avoid including things that relate only to specific activities or events, such as those listed under "What can you do to avoid accidents?" (page 1). The measures you take to reduce particular risks in particular circumstances should be recorded in a risk assessment.

See the sample health and safety policies below to give you some ideas.

Do we need risk assessments?

A risk assessment is simply the process of thinking about possible hazards, and what you will do to avoid them. So, if you have gone through the process of minimising specific risks associated with your venue, participants, equipment and activity, as outlined above "What can you do to avoid accidents?" (page 1), you will already have done a risk assessment. Once you have thought about these things, it is important to write down the decisions you make, so that you can refer to them later, and evidence them if you need to. For more help with this, see our information sheet *Risk Assessment*.

Sample Health and Safety Policies

Sample 1: Kenyan Community Association

Statement of intent

- ♦ The policy of the Kenyan Community Association is to provide and maintain safe and healthy working conditions and environment for all our volunteers and users, plus any other people who are directly affected by our activities, such as members of the public at our events.

Responsibility

- ♦ Overall and final responsibility for health and safety at all events and activities organised by the Kenyan Community Association lies with the management committee. This responsibility will be delegated to a named volunteer for each event or activity. This volunteer will be responsible for ensuring that this policy is upheld.
- ♦ For our monthly management committee meetings the responsible person is:
- ♦ For all other events the responsible person will be named in advance and their name will be noted on all relevant risk assessments. All volunteers involved will be made aware of who is responsible for health and safety.

General arrangements

- ♦ The main activity of the Kenyan Community Association is to organise social activities and support for the Kenyan community. A risk assessment will be carried out before every one off event. This will include assessing risk as it relates to all aspects of the event including: equipment; venue; volunteers; attendees. Appropriate precautions will be taken to minimise hazards at all events and activities.
- ♦ The Kenyan Community Association may also run regular events at the same venue or using the same equipment, such as our monthly committee meetings. In this case we will carry out a general risk assessment for the event/activity/equipment/venue. All general risk assessments will be reviewed at least once a year.
- ♦ We will have a trained first aider present at all events which are open to the public.
- ♦ We will make sure all volunteers and staff at events and activities are aware of the location of fire exits.
- ♦ All volunteers and staff will be made aware of the precautions they need to take as noted on the relevant risk assessment.
- ♦ No volunteer or employee will run an event or activity on their own, and at least two volunteers or employees should stay at an event until it is finished and the last attendees have left.

Review

This policy will be reviewed every year

Date.....

Signature (Chair).....

Sample 2: Friday night Youth Club

It is the general policy of Friday Night Youth Club to provide adequate control of the health and safety risks arising from our activities:

- ♦ We will provide, maintain and oversee safe and healthy working conditions, equipment and systems of work for all young people and volunteers.
- ♦ We will provide such information, training and supervision as is needed for this purpose.
- ♦ We will ensure safe handling and use of hazardous substances, in line with COSHH regulations.
- ♦ We will ensure that all volunteers are competent to do their tasks and give them adequate training.
- ♦ The welfare of young people is central to all our work.
- ♦ Our policies and procedures in relation to safeguarding are outlined in our Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy.

This policy will be reviewed and revised as necessary.

Responsibilities

- ♦ Day to day responsibility for ensuring this policy is put into practice at **Friday Night Youth Club** is delegated to the Lead Volunteer on any given evening. This will be stated on the evening's rota.
- ♦ All volunteers have a duty to:
 - co-operate with the committee on health and safety matters
 - not interfere with anything provided to safeguard their health and safety
 - take reasonable care of their own and others' health and safety
 - use equipment correctly in accordance with training and instructions
 - report all health and safety concerns to an appropriate person.

Risk assessment

- ♦ Risk assessments of our weekly venue will be carried out annually by the committee. Responsibility for observing the decisions made in the risk assessment lies with all volunteers.
- ♦ The committee will check at quarterly intervals that the action/s have been taken and the risks have been removed/reduced.
- ♦ Risk assessments of each activity will be carried out by the volunteer who is planning that activity. That volunteer is responsible for liaising with the Lead Volunteer in charge to ensure hazards are dealt with as outlined in the risk assessment.

First aid and accidents

- ♦ The First Aid Box for Friday Night Youth Club will be brought to the session by the Lead Volunteer. The management committee is responsible for checking the contents every quarter.
- ♦ Every Lead Volunteer will have up to date first aid training.
- ♦ All accidents are to be recorded in the Accident Book. The book is located in the first aid box.

Behaviour management

- ♦ Young people will be met and inducted by two Lead Volunteers before coming to a Friday Night session.
- ♦ Young people displaying abusive or violent behaviour will be asked to leave the session.

Reasonable level of risk

We will take steps to avoid unnecessary risk and very high levels of risk. However, some activities inherently involve some risk. Learning about risk management is a necessary part of young people's growth and development. We therefore aim to protect young people from unnecessary and high risk, and provide guidance and support to help young people manage some risk for themselves.

Review

Signature (Chair).....

This policy will be reviewed every year

Date.....

End of sample policies

Useful contacts

ⁱ Health and Safety Executive

www.hse.gov.uk