

Why we have Policies

A basic guide for community and voluntary groups.

Community organisations need to look at what they are doing and consider what basic rules about how they work are needed. Sometimes this is for legal reasons but more often not. Perhaps the only legal requirement for having policy is the requirement only for H&S Policy for organisations over 4 people and for Disciplinary and Grievance procedures in organisations.

However, as the trustees or committee of charitable organisations (even small ones) need to take a collective responsibility for their activities, effects and outcomes, policies are virtually the only way a charity can **govern** its activities. Not having a certain policy might not be illegal but the consequences of not having relevant policies will certainly cause management, legal and people problems. Also policies must be used; having a policy and not using it will certainly cause management, legal and people problems!!

Community organisations exist to help others without barriers of exclusion and hence ; understanding policy, ie statements of ways of working, is a basic ingredient to inclusion, equity and fairness.

Why have a policy?

- Makes it clear to anyone what the organisation's general view is on the subject which the policy is describing
- Ensures that anyone in the organisation can find out how to proceed should an issue arise
- Reduces risk for service users, for staff, trustees and other volunteers and for the organisation generally
- Helps the organisation to keep within the law
- Can help with the induction of new staff, trustees and other volunteers
- Can help to improve quality in the way your organisation operates
- Reassures funders and other stakeholders

Policies are strongly linked to managing risk in your organisation. When deciding the content of your policy, think about the potential risks and ensure that your policy does its best to protect you from them.

What is a policy?

A document that sets out principles for decision making or action, which is adopted and implemented by an organisation.

The members of the organisation are expected to follow the policy - it is a "why and what" statement. Policies are usually, but not always supported by a procedure; that is the "how" statement.

What should a policy contain?

Each policy will have its own individual content but there are some basic ingredients or headings that appear in almost all of them.

1. Title of Policy
2. A general statement from your organisation about its views on the subject of the policy e.g. "This organisation believes that"
3. Aims – why your organisation is taking this action through your policy
4. Who the policy applies to –All employees, a Particular service, Some Job roles, Service users? Volunteers?
5. Reference to any legal obligations
6. What your organisation is going to do in what situations; this includes who, in terms of job role, is going to do what. - but in outline and effect only. NB. This section may refer to a more detailed procedure document.
7. Communication and training for the policy.
8. Perhaps, monitoring of impact or adherence to the policy
9. Declaration of how often the policy will be reviewed and what the procedure for doing this is.
10. Date on which the policy was adopted and signatures of those who have adopted it.
11. Give a version numbers/ codes and include DRAFT until it is approved.

Who should write your policies?

This depends on your organisation and what the policy is about. It is beneficial for anyone who will be affected by the policy to have a chance to contribute to what it says.

However it is your trustees or management committee - those who are 'governing' your organisation - that will sign off your policies.

10 ways to make your policies work for you

1. Refer to them regularly at staff/volunteer meetings.
2. Involve users of the policy in reviewing them.
3. Keep them short - make it Policy – not Procedure – put useful information in appendices.
4. Communicate them, enforce them, monitor impact, review, change them.
5. Make them available to those who need them.
6. Use the same format – it helps people understand and remember them.
7. Don't try to review them all at one meeting
8. Get help to write or review them if you are not sure of your expertise
9. Create or join a network to share and improve your policies
10. Ensure that they help your organisation

Too many policies are POTS (Policies on Top Shelves). Policies are only as good as their use.