

Volunteering with Safety

Exercise: Lone working

Under normal circumstances we'd try to avoid lone working. It's dangerous for ourselves as we don't have support if something goes wrong or witnesses to our good behaviour and practice. It's also dangerous for clients, as there is no one to check our colleagues' practice.

In the current crisis, however, lone working has several positive aspects. It allows us to make better use of our limited resources meaning that we can reach more people who need our services. It also reduces points of contact for the virus making it less likely that we'll inadvertently spread it while trying to do good.

In this exercise, we're going to think through concrete steps we can take to introduce aspects of the support and observation which we'd normally have through co-working. Below are three role descriptions for volunteering positions. Some may be very close to roles you have within your own organisation. Take five minutes for each description and think about ways in which you could introduce support and supervision to these roles, first as a volunteer and then as a manager of volunteers.

Roles

1. A volunteer role delivering food parcels and medicines to clients who are self-isolating.
2. A volunteer role befriending clients by telephone.
3. A volunteer role providing personal care for vulnerable adults who are in isolation.



Answers

Note that the answers we've given below are not exhaustive and you may have other measures that you'd like to put in place to help keep yourself, colleagues and clients safe.

1. A volunteer role delivering food parcels and medicines to clients who are self-isolating.

We've spoken in the training about the key role volunteers can have in spotting abuse – we may be the only people from outside the household who clients come into contact with. You can back to the fourth session to remind yourself of some of the signs to look out for. With lone working, we lose a key second set of eyes who we would normally discuss concerns with and seek support from. To recreate that as a volunteer we might ask for regular rotation of clients so that we have multiple colleagues meeting and interacting with the same client.

This rotation would also solve other potential problems we could face – such as building relationships which cross professional boundaries or, as can happen, building antagonistic relationships with clients we don't get on with.

As a manager, one of our major concerns will be in ensuring that clients and colleagues do not end up harming each other. In addition to rotating colleagues – possibly by pairing them and sending them on alternate visits to the client – we might want to think about setting up a buddying system. By matching less experienced colleagues with more experienced ones for support and advice by phone we can promote the sharing of best practice and help avoid problems arising through misunderstanding or inexperience.

2. A volunteer role befriending clients by telephone.

In this situation, it wouldn't be appropriate to rotate staff as the point of the role is to allow clients to build supportive relationships and this relies in part on the regularity of contact. As volunteers though, we might still be worried that we've got no second pair of eyes on our work – there is the potential for misunderstandings between ourselves and the client, for example, which could leave us in a vulnerable position.

One thing we may want to request is that another member of staff joins us on a conference call on a regular basis – potentially once a month or every fourth meeting, whichever is sooner. This would help give clients the confidence that they are being dealt with professionally and seriously, and also bring new perspectives to issues or difficulties they might be having.



As managers, we will want some insight into what our staff are doing – we don't want their relationship with clients to be a black box in which anything might be happening. That would create the potential for abuse by staff with ulterior motives, or accidental crossing of professional boundaries. So, alongside our normal regular debriefing of staff, we may want to institute a regular contact with the client so we can talk about how they are experiencing the befriending and any additional needs they might have.

3. A volunteer role providing personal care for vulnerable adults who are in isolation.

Roles where we provide personal care, particularly those where we provide intimate care, would ideally be done by co-workers working together. However, even before the crisis, pressure on costs and staff numbers meant this is not possible. This is a dangerous situation for us as volunteers both because it increases the chance of mistakes or accidents arising from the difficult physical nature of our work, and because of the danger of misunderstanding and false accusations about our conduct.

Given that we can't work every day of the week, it would be sensible for us to share clients in pairs or small groups – we would see them for part of the week or for the morning contact, our colleague for the remainder of the week or for the afternoon contact. It's important that we also have time for handover or information-sharing virtual meetings with our paired colleague so we can discuss developments in our client and our relationship with them.

As a manager, we're going to want to have regular virtual meetings with our staff to discuss how things are going with their clients and any challenges or issues they are facing. This is an opportunity for us to remind colleagues of the training – have they seen any signs of abuse or neglect, are they worried by new people in the client's life, are other organisations acting as they should? A key aspect of our debrief will be motivational questioning – how does our staff member think of the client, as someone with needs to be fulfilled or as a problem to be solved? Are they still committed to our safeguarding policy and to treating clients with dignity? This is an opportunity for us to consider what extra support or training we can give our colleagues.