

Screening & Garda Vetting During COVID-19

Any organisation that involves volunteers will need to make an informed decision about who it will and will not accept as a volunteer. An emergency, such as COVID-19, is not a time to relax or ignore volunteer screening – it is more important now than ever!



Circumstances when you may need to have higher levels of volunteer screening include:

If volunteers will be engaging with vulnerable people

If volunteers are going to be doing a lot of unsupervised volunteering

If volunteers need any particular skills, such as driving or command of a language

If volunteers will be put in positions of trust

SOME BASICS

- There is no type of screening that comes with a complete guarantee
- Having checks in place, and advertising that you do this, is in itself a good screening technique
- Be clear and fair throughout the process; tell people what checks you are planning to carry out and get their consent beforehand
- Don't acquire any more information than you actually need to know about the volunteer
- Be consistent; check every volunteer in the same way, even if you already know him / her
- Store all confidential information securely; restrict access to those who really need it
- Never rely on 'gut instinct' alone; a combination of screening tools is always preferable than relying on only one tool
- Only use screening methods which are appropriate to the voluntary role

Role descriptions and organisational information

This is the first step in any screening and selection procedure. By providing accurate information about your organisation and the tasks to be done, you enable potential volunteers to undertake a process of self-selection or de-selection to see if they would be interested in, and suitable for, volunteering with you.

Application forms

These allow the organisation to gain administrative details (name, address etc.) as well as asking questions about people's experience and their reasons for wanting to volunteer. Application forms, unlike CVs, ensure that everyone is treated the same way and that the same information is gathered from all. Remember that written forms can be off-putting for people with literacy problems or for those with poor English so be prepared to offer alternatives.

Interviews

Interviews should always be regarded as a two-way process, in which the organisation and the volunteer can find out about each other's suitability. Make interviews as informal as possible (consider calling them 'chats'); putting people at ease will ensure you get the best out of them. During COVID-19, you could interview potential volunteers by telephone or better still online face-to-face using a tool such as Skype or Zoom.

Checking skills and qualifications

It might be appropriate, at times, to ask people to perform a test, in order to verify a certain

skill. Examples include: driving a van, operating a computer, typing, and so on. At times, you may also need to confirm that someone holds certain academic or professional qualifications, or that drivers hold valid licences, or that their motor insurance covers their volunteering activities if they will be using their own car. If you can't meet the volunteer face-to-face get them to forward you a photograph of these skills or qualifications via email.

References

Usually, an organisation requests two character references from non-relatives. References can be given over the telephone or in writing. A simple reference form or telephone reference checklist ensures consistency, is easy to complete and also guarantees that difficult issues are not avoided deliberately.

Health and Safety Checks

Dependent on the role, you may require additional health information from the volunteer in relation to them or a member of their family being in a COVID-19 "at risk" category. Be sensitive in asking questions, but be diligent in protecting your volunteers.

Trial period

Some organisations use the processes of induction, training and probation as forms of selection. For example, some require potential volunteers to undergo training before taking them on. Others have an observation period where the volunteer is closely supervised and supported while they undertake their assignment.

HOW TO SAY NO

Inevitably, screening means you sometimes have to say 'no' to potential volunteers. This can be very difficult particularly when lots of people want to help in their communities. You can refuse people by letter, on the telephone or face-to-face. Whichever method you choose, stress that you are following official policy, explain why they have been unsuccessful, offer suggestions on building experience / skills and if appropriate, offer alternatives.

Please remember that just because a volunteer might not be suitable for your organisation, it does not mean that they cannot volunteer at all. If a volunteer isn't a match for your organisation they might be suitable for another organisation, please refer them to their local Volunteer Centre.

GARDA VETTING

Garda Vetting is only one step in the volunteer screening process and should not replace a volunteer screening practice appropriate to the role. This may include online face-to-face interviews, identity verification, verbal and written reference checks, and a robust code of good practice, child protection / safeguarding policy and support structures.

Under the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012 any person whose work or activity involves access to

children or vulnerable persons must be vetted. Workers include staff, volunteers and those on student placements working for a relevant organisation through which they have access to children and / or vulnerable adults.

The act defines "relevant organisation" as one that employs or permits a person to carry out work or activities which mainly consist of them having access to, or contact with, children or vulnerable persons.

- 01** Common sense should prevail in all cases, in line with international good volunteer management practice and the **Charities Governance Code** (Core standards for leading people, 3.1) you should be clear about the roles of volunteers.
- 02** All volunteers should be provided with a clear and concise role description. This will set the parameters of the role and risk assess the requirement for the required level of screening for the role - which may include Garda Vetting.
- 03** Garda Vetting is not based on organisational policy to vet or not vet individuals. It is based on law. The National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012 provides a clear statutory basis for the vetting of persons carrying out relevant work with children or vulnerable persons.
- 04** Garda Vetting will only tell you whether or not a person has been "caught" committing a criminal act - it will only present you with convictions. Garda vetting doesn't tell you whether or not someone is a good person or not - which may be more of a concern. It is critical that you use other volunteer screening tools. During COVID-19 as a minimum requirement, we'd suggest asking for two references, which you verify, and checking ID before any volunteer starts a role.

05 Emergencies like COVID-19 are when the best and worst in society come to the fore. There are individuals who may use this opportunity to prey on the most vulnerable. We all have a responsibility to protect the most vulnerable in society, we should be using the same tools for screening volunteers as were doing before COVID-19.

06 We should still practice good volunteer management practice, this may delay the time to process applications and potential volunteers may get annoyed at this fact. Be prepared for this and communicate the estimated length of your screening process in advance.

VULNERABLE PERSONS

When vetting volunteers to engage with vulnerable persons you must use the definition of “vulnerable person” as outlined in the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012 to define whether or not volunteers require to be Garda Vetted:

“Vulnerable person” means a person, other than a child, who (a) is suffering from a disorder of the mind, whether as a result of mental illness or dementia, (b) has an intellectual disability, (c) is suffering from a physical impairment, whether as a result of injury, illness or age, or (d) has a physical disability, which is of such a nature or degree— (i) as to restrict the capacity of the person to guard himself or herself against harm by another person, or (ii)

that results in the person requiring assistance with the activities of daily living including dressing, eating, walking, washing and bathing.

This guidance is provided as an overview of the legislation in the context of COVID-19. Each organisation will need to examine how the legislation may affect their screening process. It is important to consider issues that are specific to your organisation and specific volunteer roles in your organisation.

Further details on Garda Vetting can be found on the Volunteer Ireland website, volunteer.ie and vetting.garda.ie.



Please note: Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure that this information is accurate. It is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith without accepting liability. If relevant, we recommend you take professional advice before taking any action on the matters covered herein.