

Deciding to give your time to volunteer for an organisation is an important and wonderful choice. When looking for a suitable volunteer role, most people focus on the role itself and the tasks required. It's also important to do your research on the organisation you want to volunteer with. In the Republic of Ireland, there are no legal rights protecting volunteers, as there are with employees. Therefore, it's important that you carefully consider where you volunteer, and know what to do if you are not happy.

This guide lays out what you can do to make sure you have a positive volunteering experience, and what to do if it doesn't go as planned.

Key questions to ask before you start

The best way to ensure you have a good volunteering experience, is to ask the right questions before you start volunteering with an organisation. These are:

Have they provided a clear and specific role description? At the very least, an organisation should provide a potential volunteer with a clear description of their role and responsibilities, expected hours, etc.

Will the organisation ask you to sign a volunteer agreement? This is a type of informal volunteer understanding. It is not a legal contract but further cements the relationship between the volunteer and the organisation by outlining what is expected from both parties.

Does the organisation have a volunteer policy in place? A volunteer policy will outline both the responsibilities of the volunteer and the organisation. It will define the volunteering relationship and also lay out how any difficulties can be made should they arise.

Does the organisation have a complaints procedure in place? This may form part of the volunteer policy or be a separate policy. Either way, it's important that the organisation makes it clear how a volunteer's grievances will be addressed.

Can you speak to current or past volunteers? Speaking to people who have volunteered with the organisation will give you a more personal insight into how the organisation treats their volunteers.

Does the organisation have insurance to cover their volunteers? Check with the organisation that they have adequate insurance cover in place and that volunteers are explicitly included in this policy.

While the above list is not exhaustive, they are the major questions that you should ask before you join an organisation as a volunteer.

Other factors to consider

There are a number of other considerations that may make an organisation even more attractive, which you may want to consider:

Does the organisation cover any expenses e.g.: travel, lunch?

Do they provide references for future volunteer roles or employers?

Do they provide training opportunities?

Does the organisation formally recognise their volunteers in any way?

If you have done all of your research and are still unsure of whether to join an organisation, consider finding another that will meet your requirements.

What if I'm not happy?

If you are already volunteering for an organisation and have a complaint or difficulty, inform the organisation of this grievance as outlined in their volunteer policy or complaints policy.

If the organisation does not have a volunteer policy or complaints policy in place, make your complaint in writing to the organisation and keep a record of all written correspondence. Even without a volunteer policy, most organisations will work swiftly to resolve complaints. If you feel that your complaint is not resolved to your satisfaction and there are no further ways to engage with the organisation, always remember that you are free to leave.

There are thousands of great not for profit organisations in Ireland looking for volunteers. When you give up your time for others, make sure they value that time.