

Problem Solving for Volunteers

*Guidance Sheet No. 2 for
Volunteer Involving
Organisations*

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Summary

This guide aims to help you deal with problems which could arise when working with volunteers. Although on the whole, volunteering should be a good experience for volunteers and organisations, there will inevitably be occasions when difficult issues need to be resolved.

It's a good idea to have a complaints policy and procedure in place. This need not be lengthy or complicated but if you have a clear procedure in place, it will make things clearer for both you and your volunteers.

This guide will look at:

- Why you need a procedure for resolving problems
- What is best practice
- The stages for creating a problem solving procedure:
 - For volunteers making a complaint
 - For someone complaining about a volunteer

including verbal complaints and warnings, written complaints and warnings, right to appeal, and exit interviews if that becomes necessary.

- this guide also discusses exceptional circumstances, including appropriate steps to follow if you have an occasion when an immediate suspension might be necessary

A Procedure for dealing with problems - why do you need it?

During your work with volunteers, you may occasionally encounter a variety of problems. This could include volunteers making complaints, or someone complaining about a volunteer. It could be that you need to speak to a volunteer about their performance or their attitude or behaviour.

It helps to be prepared for dealing with any of these situations and this is where an agreed procedure makes it easier. It means that all your staff have a standard method that is consistent, and shows that your organisation deals with volunteers in a fair and professional way. It will also help you to record that you have taken the correct steps in the rare event of needing to ask a volunteer to move on.

It is also important because volunteers are not covered by legislation dealing with employment or equal opportunities, so a procedure helps to ensure that your volunteers will get fair treatment and not be subjected to discrimination.

You do need to be sure that your wording does not verge into creating a contract of employment by giving volunteers employment rights, but having procedures in place for dealing with problems will save you from difficulties and unpleasant situations in the long run.

Good practice

In November 2009 a Volunteers Rights Inquiry was set up as a result of some high profile reports of problems occurring between volunteers and the organisations they volunteered with. The Inquiry produced a report in March 2011 which, whilst not suggesting legislation (in case this caused any barriers which could discourage people from volunteering), did set out the 3R Promise.

The full report can be read at:

<https://www.ncvo.org.uk/policy-and-research/volunteering-policy/what-we-believe/volunteer-rights?highlight=WylzciJd>

In brief, the 3R Promise sets out standards which organisations are recommended to adopt when dealing with complaints:

- Resolve issues in a fair, open and efficient way, to protect your volunteers and your organisation
- Make sure volunteers are dealt with fairly and provided with a fair hearing in the event of a dispute
- Ensure that all staff understand and follow the complaints procedure, so disruption to staff, other volunteers and service users is minimal
- Show your organisation respects your volunteers

Policies and Procedures

If your organisation involves paid staff, you should already have a grievance and disciplinary procedure in place. However, when working with volunteers, this would probably be too formal and could be off-putting for potential volunteers. It is better to form a 'problem solving procedure' for your volunteers, which whilst addressing essentially the same issues, is more informal and should bear in mind that you are dealing with people who are offering their free time to your organisation without payment.

The guidance below should help you to think about what you need to include in your Problem Solving Procedure, but each organisation should adapt it to suits their own unique circumstances.

If a volunteer makes a complaint:

Stage 1—Oral Complaint

The first step in resolving any complaint, no matter what the subject, is to discuss it with the volunteer making the complaint. This should be the role of the volunteer manager, or whoever has responsibility for the volunteer. If the complaint is about that person, then you should have another manager or person in authority the volunteer can talk to. Make sure these people are clearly identified in your Problem Solving Procedure.

The complainant can have someone of their choice to accompany them at this initial discussion.

Stage 2—Written Complaint

Hopefully things can be resolved at Stage 1, but if not then the issue goes to stage 2. The volunteer should put their complaint into writing, addressed to a senior member of staff, for example, the Chief Executive, or a senior manager, depending on the size of your

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Stage 2 (continued)

organisation. Your Problem Solving Procedure should make clear who formal written complaints should be addressed to.

You should also set out clear timeframes within your Problem Solving Procedure, identifying how long the volunteer has to make their formal complaint, and the timeframe for your organisation to make a response.

Stage 3—opportunity to appeal

If after stages 1 and 2 the volunteer is still not happy with the outcome of their complaint, he or she should be able to appeal to the management committee or trustee board, and your Problem Solving Procedure should make clear how to do this. This will usually result in a meeting.

The volunteer should again be able to be supported by a person of their choice at this meeting. After this, the chairperson should respond with a decision within a set time (which should be set out in your Procedure) and their decision is final.

If someone complains about a volunteer:

Occasionally, there may be minor problems regarding a volunteer's performance, behaviour or appearance, or example:

- Bad time keeping
- Overstepping their role
- Problems with attitude

Usually these should be picked up during one of the volunteer's regular supervision sessions, and it should be possible to tackle these issues without resorting to the Problem Solving Procedure.

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Most of these problems can be avoided by making sure the following points are in place:

- Have a well-planned clear Volunteer Induction Procedure, incorporating a Volunteer Policy, role description and a Volunteer Agreement, which should set out what you would expect from the volunteer and what they in turn should expect from you.
- Discuss the volunteer's training needs - do you have some suitable training, will it suit the volunteer's learning style, can you source some training which will help solve any problems e.g. Customer Service training?
- Have a regular supervision session planned, and make sure the volunteer has adequate support. Offer opportunities for the volunteer to give feedback about any concerns they may have, or difficulties they may be experiencing.
- Have a development or progression plan for the volunteer, so that you can ensure their needs and expectations from the role are being met and that they have sufficient interest and variety to motivate them.

Try whenever possible to resolve the issue in the best way for the volunteer and the complainant.

However sometimes the problem can't be resolved informally, OR if the complaint may come from an outside source (i.e. not within your organisation), OR the problem may be of a more serious nature, for example:

- Breach of confidentiality
- Breach of health and safety regulations or agreements
- Misuse of the organisations equipment or facilities

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In this instance you will have to take a more formal approach. This should be set out in your Problem Solving Procedure, and guidance for this is given below:

Stage 1—Oral Discussion

If the problem can be resolved at this early stage, this is better for the volunteer and for your organisation. So have a discussion with the volunteer, to see if there are any external issues that could be affecting their performance, such as stress, illness, or family problems.

Once you have discussed the issues, try to agree goals with the volunteer and offer support or training as appropriate to help them. Agree a deadline for another review with the volunteer. Make sure to let any third parties involved (e.g. the person who raised the complaint) know what you are doing to solve the problem.

Stage 2—Written warning

If the process has to go to the next stage, you should then issue a written warning to the volunteer, explaining why the complaint is being made. They should be allowed to give their comments or explanations to a senior member of your staff (who should be named in the Problem Solving Procedure). The volunteer should also be allowed to be accompanied by a person of their choice if they wish.

Depending on the nature of the complaint, one of two things may then happen:

Further goals are agreed with the volunteer along with deadlines for review, and help offered to reach these goals if necessary

OR

As a last resort, you may decide you have to dismiss the volunteer. If so, they should have a right to appeal.

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Stage 3—Opportunity to appeal

If you have to ask a volunteer to leave, they can appeal to your management committee or trustee board. Their appeal must be in writing and addressed to a specific person (who should be named in your Problem Solving Procedure). You may have a sub-committee to hear such appeals.

This will be followed by a meeting of the committee/board and the volunteer can again bring a person of their choice to support them. After the hearing, the committee/board must respond within a specified time, but their decision is final. All this should be set out clearly in your Problem Solving Procedure

Conducting an exit meeting

In the event that you cannot resolve a problem with a volunteer, and you do have to ask them to leave, you should consider having a final meeting with them to explain the reasons for the decision, and to clear any unfinished business.

Make sure you are in a confidential setting where you will not be disturbed and be fair, direct and firm. The volunteer may become upset or angry, so be prepared for this, but do not become emotionally involved yourself or attempt to counsel the volunteer.

Follow up with a letter, putting the decision and reasoning in writing.

You will need to inform staff, clients and other volunteers that the person has left but be respectful of their privacy, and mindful of confidentiality, and do not discuss reasons for their departure. If the volunteer worked with specific clients, you must make sure they are told who their new volunteer will be - you might want to consider introducing a new volunteer to a client in person.

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Exceptions

On very rare occasions you may think it necessary to immediately suspend a volunteer whilst you investigate complaints. This may be on grounds such as theft, assault, acts of violence, malicious damage, deliberate falsification of documents, harassment or being under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

If this becomes necessary, you must confirm your action in writing to the volunteer, and be aware that in some instances, legal proceedings may need to come into play.

Remember these points

- Problems and complaints must be treated confidentially, including storage of complaints and warnings on file.
- Keep records of what happens and who is involved.
- Ensure that you allow enough time for all meetings, and that they are held in private.
- Keep those uninvolved informed at every step of the procedure.
- Set realistic timeframes for people to make complaints or raise issues or problems, and for your organisations to respond.
- If possible, try to involve your volunteers in designing your Problem Solving Procedure.
- Review your Problem Solving Procedure at least once a year to make sure it works properly and is updated whenever necessary.

Disclaimer

We try hard to make sure that the information contained in our Guidance Sheets is correct when we produce them. However, please be aware that they are intended as a starting point to help you to think about the topics covered, and help you to plan your work with volunteers.

You should always look for further information or professional guidance where necessary. VCSPD are unable to accept liability for any loss or damage or inconvenience arising as a consequence of the use of this information.