

### Dealing with volunteer problems and complaints

Volunteering should be a positive experience for everyone however problems can still arise. This guidance looks at what to consider when creating a volunteer problem-solving procedure and how to handle complaints from or about volunteers.

Volunteers are not employees, so disciplinary and grievance procedures designed for employment law are not appropriate. Instead, create a fair and practical approach tailored to volunteers.

### **Preventing problems**

Good planning and having procedures in place help reduce the risks of problems/issues arising. Make sure you:

- Know and clearly define why and how you involve volunteers
- Offer meaningful, well-designed roles
- Provide clear role descriptions and volunteer expectations
- Match volunteers to suitable roles through effective recruitment
- Provide thorough inductions and necessary training
- Have clear and relevant policies and procedures in place
- Ensure that you have appropriate support in place and regular 1:1's/supervisions
- Provide opportunities for volunteers to feedback, as appropriate

### **What could be a problem?**

Examples of what you may need to address with volunteers include:

- Unreliability or frequent lateness
- Going beyond or blurring boundaries of volunteering and/or the role
- Breaching confidentiality or safety procedures
- Inappropriate or offensive behaviour, conduct or language
- Being under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Struggling with the role or becoming overwhelmed
- Receiving a complaint from others
- Misuse of the organisation's equipment or facilities
- Not respecting service users' confidentiality/dignity/independence and individuality
- Criminal offences for example theft, fraud
- Discrimination on grounds of disability/ethnicity/religion/gender/sexuality/age

Minor issues are often resolved informally through supervision and regular check-ins.

### **Having a problem-solving procedure**

A written procedure ensures clarity and understanding. It should explain:

- Why you have the procedure
- What is seen as a problem
- Who is responsible for handling problems
- What are the steps taken to resolve problems - what they involve and actions that might be taken
- Specific timeframes
- What happens if things don't improve and/or there is a serious breach in conduct
- How volunteers can appeal any decisions they are not happy with

*The procedure should:*

- Be consistent and fair
- Easy to understand and follow
- Where possible work things out together and as soon as possible
- Depending on the seriousness of the problem, start as an informal process
- Be in line with volunteer management good practice and your organisation values
- Be a two-way process
- Shared with volunteers and staff for example at induction, in a volunteer handbook,

### **Problem-solving steps**

By having 1:1's/regular supervisions, check-ins, feedback processes, induction, training and if appropriate team meetings in place, it helps:

- Volunteers raise any concerns
- Find out how a volunteer is doing and any areas of development needed
- Any support needed
- Have their personal circumstances or motivations to volunteer changed

These can help reduce problems arising. However, don't wait until the next supervision to raise concerns – issues can continue, escalate, appear acceptable or may affect others.

### **1. Informal discussion**

Most issues can be addressed informally. This involves:

- Having a calm and private conversation
- Explaining the concern and its impact
- Listening to the volunteer's perspective
- Establishing the facts surrounding the issue. Considering how this might be influencing their behaviour or attitude and the ability to carry out volunteering activities
- Referring back to relevant policies, role description, boundaries and expectations
- Reminding them of the induction and any previous training completed
- Agreeing on actions and timeframes to resolve the problems
- Providing support, training or role adjustments if needed
- Offering positive feedback where appropriate
- Document the conversation briefly if helpful and plan follow up meetings.

They may not realise their actions are wrong and can't change what they aren't aware of. This discussion gives them a chance to reflect, adjust their behaviour and move forward.

### **Possible actions**

- Adjust or redefine the role
- Offer volunteering in a different team or project - if there is role that matches better
- Provide training or refresher sessions
- Offer a buddy and/or opportunity to shadow others
- Take a short break from volunteering
- Refer to external support if needed
- Regular meetings/supervisions

### **2. If the issue persists or is serious**

If the issue continues or is more serious:

- Hold a formal meeting, ideally with the same person from any previous meetings addressing the problem, and if needed (and appropriate) with a second person from your organisation

- Allow the volunteer to bring someone to support them if they wish
- Make sure they are clear about why this meeting is taken place
- Review the past steps and actions taken
- Discuss the ongoing concerns and seek their input, establishing facts about the problem that has arisen or is continuing
- Clearly outline the next steps or consequences
- Provide a written summary with agreed actions, timeframes and appeal options
- You might decide that the volunteering is to end. Remember they should have the right to appeal, and this decision should be a last resort

Decide in your problem-solving procedure how many times this step will be repeated before taking further action - bear in mind how reasonable this should be for both a volunteer and the organisation if there is no change or due to the nature of the problem.

### **Under what circumstances should volunteers be put on hold immediately?**

Immediate putting volunteering on hold may be necessary in cases like:

- Theft, fraud or assault
- Violence or malicious damage
- Harassment
- Being under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Falsifying records

Carry out an investigation before deciding on next steps.

### **Ending volunteering**

If no improvement is made, or the issue is serious enough:

- Meet the volunteer privately - though again you may wish to have a second person from your organisation present. Allow the volunteer to bring someone to support them if they wish
- Be direct and respectful – avoid mixed messages
- Decide what you are going to say in advance. Remember at this stage the decision to end volunteering has already been made and is not being changed
- Expect the volunteer to express their emotions but keep your emotions in check
- Provide a written summary of the decision and reasons
- Inform others (staff, service users and volunteers) without giving details
- Reassign any support they were giving to those accessing your services appropriately.

This step should only happen after fair attempts were taken to resolve the issue.

### **Right to appeal**

Even though volunteers don't have employee rights, fair treatment is essential. Volunteers should:

- Be able to appeal a decision in writing to a designated person (e.g. Chair or CEO)
- Be offered the chance to bring someone to an appeal meeting
- Receive a response within the set timeframe
- Be informed that an appeal decision is final

*To be aware that volunteers are covered by health and safety law and data protection.*

## **Handling complaints from volunteers**

Volunteers should be able to raise complaints about their experience. These should be handled fairly and promptly to:

- Show respect and care for your volunteers
- Protect your volunteers, staff and those accessing your services
- Maintain your organisation's reputation

You may wish to link volunteer complaints to your general complaints procedure and if in place referring to your Whistleblowing Policy\*

You could consider these stages of complaint handling:

### **1. Informal (oral) complains**

Trying to resolve through discussion with the volunteer's supervisor or coordinator. If it's about them then it should be referred to another manager.

### **2. Formal (written) complaint**

If unresolved, the volunteer can raise the issue in writing. Your procedure should have a set timeframe for this – for example a month for someone to decide if they will continue with their complaint and the organisation likewise should respond within a given timeframe.

Don't forget that some volunteers may have difficulty submitting something in writing, so consideration should be given to flexibility and offering support where appropriate.

### **3. Appeal**

If still unresolved, a further appeal can be made, typically to the board or chair. Set clear timeframes and the chairs/board decision is final.

## **After a problem or complaint**

Always review your volunteer programme when an issue arises:

- Update induction, training and role descriptions as needed
- Check that support systems are working well
- Use feedback to improve clarity and communication
- Review policies and procedures – update or create new ones if needed
- Review your risk assessments

## **Further information and resources**

[NVCO – Solving Volunteer Problems](#)

[NCVO – If Volunteering goes wrong](#)

*\* A whistleblowing policy explains how staff and volunteers can report concerns about wrongdoing, such as unsafe practices, fraud, or abuse, without fear of punishment. It protects those who speak up and ensures issues are taken seriously and dealt with properly.*

