

Problem solving

Summary

While the involvement of volunteers is by and large a positive experience for everyone involved, sometimes things can go wrong.

This Information Sheet explains why it's good practice to have a problem solving procedure in place, to deal with issues and complaints raised either by or about volunteers. It covers

- Why have a problem solving procedure?
- Good practice
- What to do if a volunteer makes a complaint
- What to do if someone complains about a volunteer
- Conducting a 'volunteer exit' meeting
- Some general points to remember

In the case of small groups and organisations, it's probably unnecessary to put in place a detailed problem solving procedure. However, issues can still arise so it's still a good idea to have a clear way of dealing with them.

Why have a problem solving procedure?

Problems may arise in a number of ways. A volunteer may make a complaint about another volunteer, a member of staff or the organisation itself. A volunteer's performance may have declined, or someone may have made a complaint about a volunteer's work, attitude or conduct.

Having a procedure in place can make the process much easier to manage. It ensures consistency, provides a means of identifying a solution and demonstrates your organisation's commitment to volunteering good practice. It will also help to demonstrate the steps you have taken in the event that your organisation's relationship with a volunteer has to be ended.

Also, whereas employees have grievance and disciplinary policies, volunteers are not covered by employment or equal opportunities legislation. In fact, volunteers only have the same legal rights as the general public. Such a policy helps to ensure that volunteers are treated fairly and not discriminated against.

Concerns have been raised that having a problem solving procedure may contribute to the creation of a contract with volunteers, giving them access to some or all employment rights. However, this is a low risk and should be weighed against the difficulties that could arise from not having clear procedures in place.

Good practice

All complaints should be resolved openly, fairly and quickly to

- protect your volunteers;
- minimise any disruption to your staff, service users and other volunteers;
- demonstrate that your organisation respects its volunteers; and
- protect the reputation of your organisation.

It is good practice to avoid using the same grievance and disciplinary policy for both staff and volunteers, and the term 'problem solving procedure' helps to differentiate between the two. Whereas grievance and disciplinary policies for paid staff are formal in their language and tone, the policy you write for volunteers should be more informal in tone.

What follows is guidance for creating a problem solving procedure. Each organisation should tailor its procedure to suit its individual situation.

What to do if a volunteer makes a complaint

Stage 1 | Oral complaint

Initial complaints, whether concerning a member of staff, the organisation or another volunteer, should first be discussed with the volunteer informally. If the complaint concerns the volunteer manager the matter should be referred to another manager or other responsible person. This person should be named in the problem solving procedure if you have one.

The volunteer should be given the option to be accompanied to the meeting by a nominated person of their choice. If the issue cannot be resolved at this stage then the volunteer should proceed to stage 2.

Stage 2 | Written complaint

If the volunteer is not satisfied with the outcome of the oral complaint, they should make a formal complaint in writing to a senior member of staff or other responsible person. This person should be named in the organisation's problem solving procedures if you have them.

There should be a timeframe within which the volunteer can make the formal complaint. The organisation should commit to responding to the complaint within a particular timeframe.

Stage 3 | Opportunity to appeal

If the volunteer is not satisfied with the outcome, then they should be able to appeal to a particular member of the management committee or trustee board, usually the Chair. In some organisations a sub-committee is formed specifically to deal with complaints.

The volunteer should be given the option to be accompanied to the meeting by a person of their choice. The Chair or sub-committee will need to respond within a specified time, and their decision should be final.

What to do if someone complains about a volunteer

Sometimes minor issues can arise during the course of volunteering, such as a volunteer not fitting into the team as well as was expected, not meeting the required standards or being unreliable.

Such issues should usually be detected during regular supervision, and may be quite easy to resolve without resorting to formal procedures. The following list suggests how some issues can be dealt with.

- A well thought out induction pack, volunteer policy and role description should provide the volunteer with a good foundation on which to undertake their volunteering. However, you may need to remind the volunteer of the policies, ground rules etc within your organisation.
- Check if the volunteer has any training needs. Everyone learns at a different pace and in a different way. Do you need to adapt your training materials, or change the way in which you deliver training, so that it benefits the volunteer more effectively?
- Does the volunteer need extra support or supervision?
- Is the volunteer feeling unfulfilled in their current role? Have their needs changed, or would they like to use different skills to help the organisation? If so, you could modify their role description, ask them if they would like to work in another department or develop a completely new role for them.
- Is the volunteer suffering from burnout or unable to cope with the demands of the role? They may need a break from volunteering, or may prefer to volunteer in another organisation for a while, as part of a volunteer swap. The volunteer may feel ready to stop volunteering altogether.

Remember, always aim to find the best solution for the volunteer. If the issue isn't resolved through regular supervision, or if a complaint is raised by a third party, then the problem will need to be dealt with on a more formal basis.

Stage 1 | Oral discussion

The first step should be to discuss the complaint with the volunteer. There could be external factors influencing their ability to carry out tasks, their behaviour or their attitude.

This meeting should seek to identify goals that will help the volunteer fulfil their role, and to offer extra support, supervision and training where necessary. A deadline should be agreed for reviewing the situation with the volunteer.

If the complaint was raised by someone else you should keep them informed of the measures you are taking to rectify the situation.

Stage 2 | Written warning

If the issue hasn't been or cannot be resolved by the oral discussion or the review, the volunteer manager can issue the volunteer with a written warning outlining the reason for the complaint.

The volunteer should be given the opportunity to state their case, which could be to either the volunteer manager or a senior member of staff. The volunteer should be allowed to be accompanied by a person of their choice.

Depending on the nature of the complaint, further objectives could be set, and help offered to the volunteer. However, if the organisation decides to ask the volunteer to leave, then the volunteer should be given the opportunity to appeal. The decision to ask a volunteer to leave should be a last resort.

Stage 3 | Opportunity to appeal

If a volunteer has been asked to leave then they should be able to appeal in writing to a particular member of the management committee or trustee board, usually the Chair. Sometimes a sub-committee can be formed specifically to hear appeals.

The volunteer should be given the option to be accompanied to the meeting by a person of their choice. The Chair or sub-committee will need to respond within a specified time, and their decision should be final.

Conducting an exit meeting

If you do decide to ask a volunteer to leave, it's good practice to have an exit meeting if possible to explain the decision and tie up any loose ends.

- Make sure that the meeting takes place in a confidential setting, where you are unlikely to be disturbed.
- Be quick and direct. Do not back down. At this stage, the decision to ask the volunteer to leave has already been made.
- Do not attempt to counsel the volunteer, as this will send confusing signals to them.
- Expect the volunteer to express their emotions, but keep your emotions in check.
- Follow up the meeting with a letter to re-iterate the decision to ask the volunteer to leave, as well as outlining the reasons for doing so. Include any information relating to their departure.
- Inform staff, clients and other volunteers of the outcome, but do not give reasons for the volunteer's departure.
- If the volunteer had responsibilities for certain clients, make sure that the clients are informed of the new volunteer that will be assigned to them.

Exceptions

In some cases volunteers may need to be suspended immediately while an investigation is carried out. These include, but are not limited to, acts that constitute gross misconduct, eg theft, assault, act of violence, malicious damage, deliberate falsification of documents, harassment or being under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

The decision to suspend a volunteer needs to be confirmed to the volunteer in writing. In some cases, legal proceedings may need to be concluded before the next step of your problem solving procedure can take place.

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Some points to remember

- All complaints must be treated confidentially, and should only be discussed amongst those who are directly involved in trying to resolve the issue.
- Keep records of what happens and who is involved.
- You may wish to include a policy on storing complaints and warnings on file. If you do, you need to decide how long they will be kept on record for.
- Ensure that you allow enough time for all meetings, and that they are conducted somewhere you will not be interrupted.
- Keep complainants informed at every step of the procedure.
- Set realistic timeframes for people to make complaints, and for your organisation to respond.
- If the person making the complaint is a service user, reassure them that their complaint will not affect their right to use your services. Service user volunteers should still be able to use your services, unless they are suspended while an investigation into an act of gross misconduct is carried out.
- If your organisation has a human resources department, you may want to consider their role in your problem solving procedure.
- If you're unsure as to what your problem solving procedure should be, you could consult your volunteers by involving them in the design of the policy.
- As with all policies, review your problem solving procedures regularly to ensure that they are working effectively.

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