
Dealing with problems

The volunteer relationship is different to that of paid workers. Volunteers are working under a contract, and the ultimate discipline in the workplace – the sack – means much less to someone who isn't being paid and could leave at any point. At the same time they lack protection from unfair dismissal or other forms of poor treatment. Despite this in most cases volunteering works well, but occasionally problems can arise. You cannot avoid this completely, but you can take steps to reduce their likelihood, and make handling them less difficult.

This information sheet:

- Tells you where you stand when it comes to solving issues with volunteers
- Suggests ways of lowering the chances of problems arising
- Gives advice on how to handle problems with volunteers, both informally and formally
- Sets out the structure for a basic policy for dealing with volunteer problems

What's my legal position?

Volunteers aren't covered by employment law. This means that they cannot take legal action against an organisation if they feel they're been poorly treated – or even discriminated against. Organisations don't have to have a formal procedure in place to handle disputes or complaints in the same way they do for their paid staff. However this lack of legal protection should not be used as an excuse by organisations for ignoring volunteer complaints, or dealing with problems with volunteers in an inconsistent or unfair manner.

What's considered to be good practice?

This lack of legal protection obviously places volunteers in a vulnerable position. Organisations should therefore take steps to ensure that complaints from or about volunteers are treated fairly. This would typically mean putting in place procedures to handle problems. This is also for the benefit of the organisation. If volunteers have grievances that are not dealt with they may leave, or at the very least not give their time as

enthusiastically as they could. Similarly if a volunteer is asked to leave without a clear procedure having been used this could look like an arbitrary decision, leaving other volunteers unsettled.

In addition, thought should be given to the reasons why some problems arise in the first place, and/or escalate to a damaging point where they could have been solved at an earlier time with less conflict and stress on all sides.

How can we avoid problems arising in the first place?

Prevention is better than cure. It's impossible to prevent problems arising at all, but you can take steps to head off some typical issues.

At recruitment

A robust recruitment process can help. With sensitive volunteer positions – dealing with vulnerable clients for example - seeing how people react to potential situations, or role playing can give you an idea of how they'll cope with the role. Explore attitudes to the tasks and settings they will face. If possible, see how they interact with others.

We often think of the recruitment/selection process as just being about finding the right volunteer, but it should also give the individual the chance to see whether the role will be right for them. Give as much information as you can to ensure the person is making an informed decision to take on the role. It's no loss for potential volunteers to self-select themselves out at this stage if they aren't going to be suitable for the role in the longer term. Potential volunteers should receive full details their role and what will be expected of them, again allowing them to self-select out of the role.

Through support and supervision

Offer volunteers regular feedback and support. Giving them a chance to raise issues, as well as monitoring their work on an ongoing basis means you have the opportunity to nip problems in the bud. Set the relationship out clearly. All volunteers should be aware of their responsibilities, the boundaries of their role, and the mutual expectations between them and your organisation. You should refer to these where relevant when raising issues with volunteers.

Collective feedback, through volunteer meetings, closed social media groups, suggestion boxes, volunteer surveys and so on also give people the chance to speak up and feel listened to.

Showing appreciation of volunteers

A lack of appreciation of volunteers can lead to disaffection and poor motivation. Thank volunteers, whether verbally or through more formal recognition. This could include Volunteers Week celebrations or Christmas parties, volunteering certificates, explicit recognition of volunteering by the chief executive, in public statements and annual reports, birthday cards, internal newsletters, staff meetings – you can be as creative as you like.

Good organisation of volunteering

Volunteers are in effect making a gift of their time. If it feels like this isn't being well-used then they are unlikely to feel valued. Put yourself in the position of a volunteer who turns up on their regular day to be told "There's not a desk free for you today, can you come back next week?" A little planning can make a big difference - a lack of organisation is often cited as a complaint by volunteers'

Once something has arisen, how do we deal with it?

Assuming it's not an immediately serious issue (see below), the first step should usually be to raise it informally with the volunteer. All kinds of situations could arise, so it's hard to give comprehensive guidance, but there are some general principles that can help in the more straightforward cases.

- Raise issues sooner rather than later. Doing so can stop small problems becoming major ones. It's easier to resolve things at this stage, and stops problematic behaviour becoming entrenched.
- Explain the consequences of their behaviour. You want volunteers to take your points on board. Showing how their behaviour has impacted on the work of the scheme means that they cannot dismiss your complaint as irrelevant or nitpicking.
- Refer to relevant policies. Your volunteer agreement and/or policy should set out the responsibilities and expectations the volunteer agreed to when they started their role.
- Allow the volunteer to put their side of the story. Do not make assumptions – it may be that, for example, persistent lateness has been due to a change in the volunteer's outside circumstances rather than mere tardiness.
- Agree steps forward. This could be a change in behaviour. Equally it might be action on your part – reducing workload, or additional training.
- Use formal procedures if informal interventions don't work, or the matter is serious.

What should we do if something serious happens?

Some issues demand a different approach. This could be where a volunteer is alleged to have used or threatened violence, or acted in a discriminatory manner.

The first step would be to tell the volunteer to stop volunteering until the matter is resolved. The incident should be investigated by an appropriate person (or group of people), with the volunteer given the opportunity to put their side of the story. If it is felt that they had acted in a way the organisation cannot tolerate then they should be asked to leave.

A basic problem-solving procedure

Hopefully most issues can be solved informally, but where they can't it pays to have a procedure in place. This means that you will have something to follow to help you handle the issue, and show the volunteer that – even if they disagree with the outcome – that at least this is not an arbitrary process. It gives all volunteers the reassurance that complaints will be listened to, and that if you raise a problem with them it will be treated openly and consistently. What follows is a basic framework for a procedure for dealing with problems. You may need to adapt it to better suit your organisation and/or its structure, and will need to fill in some of the blanks.

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Example Problem Solving Procedure

These procedures are in place to help us deal with problems fairly and consistently.

If a volunteer has a complaint about the organisation, a member of staff or another volunteer:

We hope that most problems can be solved informally. But if this is not the case the volunteer should raise the matter formally with their supervisor. If the complaint is against the supervisor, then the volunteer should request a meeting with (e.g. *the volunteer coordinator*).

If the volunteer feels that the issue has not been resolved then it should be put in writing to (*the volunteer coordinator / an appropriate person*), who will arrange a meeting with them to discuss the issue. Further investigation may need to take place, but the matter should be dealt with within 14 days.

If there is a problem with a volunteer's behaviour:

Again, hopefully this can be resolved informally. Many 'problems' are simply due to training needs, a lack of support, inappropriate roles and so on. Where informal measures are not enough the volunteer's supervisor will raise the issue in a formal meeting with the volunteer. The volunteer will be entitled to put their case. If it is felt necessary an informal warning may be issued, with steps agreed to improve conduct.

If the issue is still not resolved a meeting involving the volunteer, volunteer's supervisor and (*whoever the appropriate person is – volunteer coordinator, manager etc*) will be called. This may result in a formal warning, with the understanding that following another warning the volunteer will be asked to leave.

If a volunteer is believed to have behaved in a manner that has or could have seriously affected the organisation – for example theft, bullying, or violence – they will be immediately asked to stop volunteering while the matter is investigated by (*the volunteer coordinator / manager etc*). The volunteer will be able to put their case, and a decision will be made within 14 days. If the complaint against the volunteer is upheld they will be excluded from volunteering.

Appealing a decision

If you are unhappy with a formal decision, you can appeal to You will hear from them within (14?) days, and this decision will be final.

(Is there anyone that would be a suitable person for there to be appeals to? You don't need to have appeals if there isn't really the structure to do so, but it is common to have them, and helps with the reassurance that the organisation wishes to act fairly).

In all cases volunteers have the right to be accompanied at meetings on these issues by a volunteer, member of staff or friend.