

Volunteering – what to do if things go wrong

Introduction

As part of making sure your volunteers' experiences are as enjoyable and positive as possible, it is a good idea to offer regular support to all volunteers. Sometimes, however, problems do arise. These may be related to:

- Performance
- Behaviours
- Attendance
- Personality clashes
- Boundaries

They may arise from:

- Unclear expectations
- Lack of Induction
- Unclear role descriptions
- Inadequate training and supervision
- Poor communication
- Volunteering environment
- Lack of equal opportunities
- Bullying and harassment
- Mismatch between volunteer and opportunity



At the start of a volunteer appointment you can minimise the likelihood of problems arising by offering:

- Clear role descriptions
- Recruitment procedures
- Safeguarding procedures
- A Volunteer Agreement
- Supervision procedures

It's important to develop good working relationships, work together and ensure everyone is treated fairly and is valued.

When things go wrong use a problem solving procedure

Having a problem solving procedure is good practice and ensures that volunteers are treated in a fair and equal manner. It demonstrates respect for your volunteers and it can protect your reputation as a volunteer involving organisation. This is particularly important as volunteers are not currently covered by employment legislation.

A problem-solving procedure should outline what your organisation will do if:

- a volunteer has a concern about your organisation, a member of staff or another volunteer.
- the organisation has a concern about a volunteer

Ideally, someone from your organisation should be identified as the responsible person for providing advice and support for problems prior to moving to an informal or formal problem-solving procedure. This person might also be responsible for giving support and advice to volunteers involved in a situation. It is the responsibility of the organisation to ensure that the problem-solving procedure is used appropriately. In the case of a member of staff having a complaint raised against them, a senior manager or member of the trustee board should usually be appointed as a representative who will take on this role. The policy you write needs to be in clear language that is easy to understand. See below for some ideas for a problem solving procedure. These are for guidance only as each organisation should have its own procedure based on its individual situation.

Ideally your procedure will outline an informal and more formal approach:

Informal problem-solving procedure

All parties concerned should be encouraged to try and solve things informally. A chat with the volunteer concerned may clear up any misunderstandings. You may find that the volunteer is unhappy in the current role and might be more comfortable in an alternative role and the problem will be solved. You may find it easier to do this in a more structured approach.



- **What should a staff member do if they have a concern or issue with a volunteer?**
If a staff member is concerned with a volunteer's performance or behaviour and an attempt to address this directly is not appropriate, the staff member should discuss the matter with their line manager/ designated trustee. If the volunteer is uncomfortable discussing the matter with their volunteer supervisor, it is helpful to identify someone else they might approach to act a mediator. Wherever possible, problems should try to be resolved through open and fair conversations, preferably in person. Any information gathered or raised during interventions should be treated in confidence. The volunteer should be informed of all concerns by the staff member and attempts made to resolve the concern at this stage.
- **What should a volunteer do if they have a concern or issue with a member of staff?**
If the volunteer feels able to do so, they should first discuss the matter with their volunteer supervisor. If they are uncomfortable with this, they should raise the matter with the designated senior manager or trustee. If the problem cannot be resolved through the informal problem-solving procedure and there is due cause, the matter might need to be escalated to your organisation's grievance procedure. The volunteer should be advised of the procedure relating to this.
- **What should a volunteer do if they have a concern or issue with another volunteer?**
If a volunteer feels able to do so, they should first discuss the matter with the volunteer in question and ideally resolve this informally. If they are uncomfortable with this and there is due

cause they should raise the matter with the designated staff member so the concern can be dealt with through the procedure detailed below.

You may decide that a structured meeting will help at this informal stage

The designated staff member should ensure that:

- a meeting takes place as soon as possible in a quiet place and in a convenient and neutral location where interruptions are unlikely
- any notes taken at this meeting are typed up and shared with the volunteer within 10 working days
- the volunteer is given sufficient time to talk and to give their perspective
- possible solutions are discussed and clearly understood by both parties
- any actions are agreed and a date is set to review the actions within 30 days of the meeting.

It may be necessary to have more than one meeting in order to resolve an issue. If this is the case, the above points should be followed in subsequent meetings. The meeting(s) are a chance to identify any additional support or training for the volunteer within their role and for them to evaluate whether the volunteer role is still suitable or has left them unfulfilled. It may be that an alternative volunteer role could be offered.

Formal problem-solving procedure

If the issue is more serious you may need to move to a formal problem-solving procedure.

Step One: formal meeting

If there is no improvement to the previous concern raised regarding the volunteer, or where the concern is of a serious nature, it will be necessary to invite the volunteer to a formal meeting in which the volunteer may be accompanied by a companion of their choice. Where mitigating circumstances have contributed to the concern raised, these should be discussed and taken into consideration. For the formal procedure to be followed, the designated person and or trustee should usually be informed before any meetings are carried out.



The designated person should:

- Write to the volunteer inviting them to a formal meeting
- Ensure that the volunteer receives a written statement of the issue along with a copy of the procedure and access to any relevant information relating to the concern
- Ensure the volunteer is given enough time to prepare (a minimum of 5 working days) whilst also ensuring that the meeting takes place as soon as possible
- Ensure any possible solutions are discussed and clearly understood by each party
- Take notes during the meeting and ensure that these are shared within 10 working days
- Ensure that any actions agreed to resolve the situation are understood by all and a time is set to review the outcomes of these actions
- Ensure that the volunteer understands what will happen if agreed actions are not met.

Consideration may need to be given to temporarily suspending the volunteer from volunteering for a period of further investigation

Step Two: written warning

If the issue has not been resolved satisfactorily within the agreed timeframe, the designated person should send the volunteer a written warning after first consulting with the volunteer supervisor.

The warning should explain:

- What was discussed during the formal meeting and why the written warning has become necessary
- Any steps that the volunteer will be expected to make or improve on within a specified amount of time. If the volunteer does not agree to the next steps outlined within the written warning, it needs to be clear that they may be dismissed from being a volunteer with your organisation.

Step Three: dismissal

If there is no improvement to performance or change in behaviour after the agreed period set out in the written warning and you feel you need to ask the volunteer to leave, the volunteer can be refused permission to continue to volunteer with your organisation. The final decision to dismiss a volunteer will be made by the designated person, usually with reference to the Board of Trustees. Where possible, the volunteer should be informed in person and this should be followed by written confirmation explaining why the volunteer will be dismissed. If relevant, a volunteer who has been dismissed may still be a member of your organisation. This will depend on your constitution.

Step Four: appeal

If a volunteer is not content with their dismissal, they may appeal the decision. They must do this in writing within 10 working days usually to the Chair of the Trustee Board. The Chair will then arrange an appeal meeting; each situation will be examined thoroughly. The dismissed volunteer can be accompanied by a companion of their choice. Once the appeal has been heard and the dismissed volunteer is given a full and fair opportunity to present their appeal, the Chair will write to the dismissed volunteer informing them of the outcome of the appeal. If no appeal is raised within 10 working days of the decision to dismiss a volunteer, you may need to let other volunteer know that the volunteer will not be returning. No information shared as part of the problem-solving procedure should be passed to others.

Additional information

Suspension

There may be occasions where a volunteer could be temporarily suspended from their role allowing your organisation an opportunity to thoroughly carry out an investigation. The period of suspension should be clearly defined to the volunteer. It should be made clear that suspension is not considered as confirmation of any wrong-doing.

The role of the designated person – it should be clear from the outset who the designated person is who will usually be the first point of contact for any issues relating to the problem solving procedure.

Your Volunteer Supervisor or appointed person will usually be responsible for classifying the severity of a concern for your organisation been raised. Where extremely serious concerns are raised it may be necessary to carry out an external investigation. This will not be necessary for most cases but will apply where a statutory agency e.g. the police, would investigate, for example in the cases of theft, fraud or allegations of abuse.

You may want to attach an appendix to your procedure which provides examples of what may be deemed unacceptable or extreme unacceptable behaviour. The following list may be useful for reference but is by no means exhaustive.

Severity	Description
Minor	A minor concern which will have little impact on the work of your organisation; usually arising from a mistake or misunderstanding
Serious	A concern that impacts on your organisation but which doesn't usually lead to a loss of income, damage to property, staff, volunteers or intellectual property
Extremely serious	A concern relating to damage to staff, volunteers, property, income or reputation. Actions in this category are likely to result in you having to ask the volunteer to leave.

Example behaviour categorisation

Unacceptable Behaviour – depending on the severity, these may be deemed as minor or serious; the following is a non-exhaustive list of examples

- Unsatisfactory performance or failure to carry out reasonable volunteering activities as requested
- Not fulfilling, or acting outside of a role description
- Using inappropriate language which others may find offensive
- Unhelpful or discourteous behaviour towards others
- Not following the policies, procedures, values or rules outlined by your organisation

Extreme unacceptable behaviour: this should be a list of things considered as serious or extremely serious with a note that acts of this nature will usually result in dismissal from volunteering:

- Theft, fraud, dishonesty or deliberate falsification of your organisation's documentation
- Violence or assault including abusive, threatening or offensive behaviour to others
- Harassment of employees, volunteers, members, visitors, clients or partners
- Repeated failure to comply with your organisation's policies and procedures
- Reoccurrence of a minor issue, or a number of different minor incidents
- Prolonged negative attitude towards others
- Serious misrepresentation or negative representation of your organisation
- Malicious damage to property belonging to your organisation, staff, volunteers or visitors
- Serious breach of confidence
- Violation of your organisations safeguarding policy

- Acts of incitement or actual acts of discrimination or harassment or abuse or bullying (mental or physical) on the grounds of gender, race, age, religion, colour, ethnic origin or sexual orientation against another volunteer, member of staff or the public.
 - Being unfit for the role due to the effects of alcohol or illegal drugs or possession of drugs
 - Misuse of your organisation's name
 - Failure to follow health & safety guidelines or to report concerns relating to the health, safety and welfare of others
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Additional support

If you need any advice or support regarding the information outlined in this resource, Community First Yorkshire can help. Find out more about the volunteering support we offer on our [website](#), or simply fill in an [enquiry form](#) and we'll get back to you.

Don't forget, you can advertise your volunteering roles for free on our [Volunteering in North Yorkshire \(VINY\)](#) directory?

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