

Dealing with Problems



What to do when things go wrong...

Whilst the involvement of volunteers benefits many organisations, sometimes things can go wrong. A volunteer might be unhappy or have a complaint about the organisation, a colleague or a service user.

Similarly, your group or organisation may be unhappy about volunteers' conduct, attitude or behaviour, or you may receive a complaint about a volunteer from another volunteer, a service user or a paid staff member. In this situation, you need to deal with things fairly and effectively.

Problem solving procedures and differentiating between staff and volunteers

It's good practice to have a problem solving procedure in place, to deal with issues and complaints that are raised either by volunteers, or about volunteers. This procedure is likely to differ from the one that paid staff use. It's really important that the two procedures are *clear* and *different* - paid staff will have a contract and have specific terms and conditions relating to their employment. Volunteers don't have anything like that in writing, so they are not bound by the same terms.

The benefits of having a problem solving procedure:

- Identify the nature of the problem.
- Identify possible solutions and open up lines of communication.
- Potentially build a case for terminating a volunteering relationship.
- Provide evidence that explains your decision(s) to others, both internally within the organisation and externally, outside of your organisation, in line with your organisation's policies and procedures.

Avoiding problems in the first place:

Sometimes, minor issues can arise during the course of volunteering and having regular support/ supervision sessions will help you to resolve them quickly and effectively, without resorting to formal procedures. A clear grievance procedure, volunteer policy and role description can help to ensure that everyone is clear about their roles and remit. Similarly, a volunteer agreement will set out; what the organisation expects from the volunteer and what the volunteer can expect from the organisation. These tools can be useful when starting a discussion with a volunteer if you need to discuss their role or performance.

Developing a problem solving procedure

The procedure should be written in clear language so that it is easy to understand and should enable all complaints to be dealt with openly, fairly and quickly so that volunteers are protected and there is minimal disruption to staff, service users and other volunteers. At the very least, the procedure should state what happens if:

- A volunteer makes a complaint
- If someone complains a volunteer

Exceptions

Acts of physical violence, theft and racial abuse constitute gross misconduct and mean that volunteers can be suspended immediately whilst investigations are carried out. The volunteer should be informed of the decision to suspend in writing and in some cases, legal proceedings may need to be concluded before the next stage of your procedure can take place.