

Writing a Problem Solving Procedure

While the involvement of volunteers is by and large a positive experience for everyone involved, it is important to bear in mind that sometimes things can go wrong. From time to time there may be instances where a volunteer has a complaint about another volunteer, a member of staff or the organisation itself.

Similarly, you may find that a volunteer's performance has declined, or that someone else has complained about a volunteer's contribution, attitude or conduct.

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Whilst organisations do not have legal duties towards volunteers, and generally do not wish to create a contractual relationship with them, a problem solving procedure will ensure that you know how to deal with problems consistently should they arise.

It is good practice to avoid using the same grievance and disciplinary policy for both staff and volunteers, and the term 'problem solving procedures' helps to differentiate between the two.

The procedure should be split into two sections, the first being if the volunteer wants to complain, and the latter if a complaint is made against the volunteer.

If the volunteer wants to complain

This procedure should give the volunteer the opportunity to complain if they feel that they may have been unfairly treated or if they have an issue which they feel may be a cause for concern within the organisation.

Stage 1 - Oral complaint

- Initial complaints, whether against a member of staff, the organisation or another volunteer, should be discussed with the volunteer. If the complaint is about the volunteer manager, then the matter should be referred to another manager.
- This person should be named in the problem solving procedure. A meeting should be arranged and the volunteer should be informed that they can be accompanied by a nominated person of their choice.
- If the issue cannot be resolved at this stage then the volunteer should be informed that they can proceed to Stage 2.

Stage 2 - In writing

If the volunteer is not satisfied with the outcome of the oral complaint, they may wish to make a formal complaint in writing to a more senior member of staff. This person again should be named in the organisation's problem solving along with a set time frame in which the organisation should respond in writing.

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Stage 3 - Opportunity to appeal

If the volunteer is not satisfied with the outcome, then they should be made aware that they may appeal to a member of the management committee, if applicable, usually the Chair. In some organisations a sub-committee can be formed specifically to deal with complaints. The volunteer can again have a nominated person present at this meeting.

The procedure should also state the time frame that the volunteer would expect to receive a response by, and that their decision is final. Volunteers have no legal rights unless they can prove that they are in fact employees, or that the organisation has been negligent in its duty of care towards them.

If someone complains about a volunteer

This part of the problem solving procedure gives the volunteer the opportunity to be told why a complaint has arisen, the opportunity to state their case and the chance to appeal, if appropriate.

Stage 1 – Oral discussion

The first step is to discuss the complaint with the volunteer. There could be external factors influencing their ability to carry out tasks, or on their behaviour or attitude. Identify goals that will help the volunteer to fulfill their role, and offer extra support, supervision and training where necessary. Agree a deadline for reviewing the situation with the volunteer.

If the complaint was raised by someone else, keep them informed of the measures you are taking to rectify the situation. If you would prefer complaints to be put in writing, then state this in your problem solving procedure.

Stage 2 – Written warning

If the issue hasn't been resolved by the oral discussion or the review, then 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 also be allowed to be accompanied by a person of their choice at this meeting.

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. Asking 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 appeal in writing to a member of the management committee if applicable, usually the Chair. Sometimes a subcommittee can be formed specifically to hear appeals. The volunteer should be invited to have a nominated person present at this meeting. The Chair or sub-committee will need to respond within a specified time, and their decision is final.

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Exceptions

There are some occasions when volunteers should be suspended immediately while an investigation is carried out. These include, but are not limited to, acts that constitute gross misconduct, such as theft, act of violence, malicious damage, deliberate falsification of documents 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.

Conducting the 'volunteer exit' meeting

If you do decide to ask the volunteer to leave, there are a few good practice tips to bear in mind:

- 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.

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.
- 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 where you will not be interrupted.

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- 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 may still be able to use your services, unless they are suspended while an investigation into an act of gross misconduct is carried out.

This information sheet was compiled using information from Volunteering England's Problem Solving Information Sheet. This can be found at <http://www.volunteering.org.uk/goodpractice>.

For more information about volunteering contact VODA's Volunteer Centre on 0191 643 2639 or email volunteering@voda.org.uk.

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