Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations

Your local county voluntary council

4. Volunteers

4.26 Managing concerns relating to volunteers

Whilst the involvement of volunteers is usually a positive experience for all concerned, sometimes things go wrong within any volunteer programme. The aim is usually to handle difficult situations on an informal basis if possible, by talking to those concerned, clarifying issues and reaching consensus.

However, sometimes this is not sufficient. Organisations are advised to have in place 'problem solving procedures' which are specific to volunteers.

Volunteers' relationship to your organisation is different from that of staff, most notably that they are not under any legal contract. Disciplinary process which are used for staff are therefore not appropriate in dealing with volunteer problems.

This information sheet looks at some of the kinds of problems that most commonly arise, and at how your organisation can be well prepared to handle difficulties in a fair, consistent and respectful manner.

Your approach to handling complaints, difficulties and problems relating to volunteers should form part of the induction of both volunteers and staff (along with other relevant policies), so that everyone is clear of the standards expected and what action could be taken if these are not upheld.

Good supervision, support and monitoring processes all help to address issues at the earliest possible stage. Other relevant information sheets address these, and are noted under Further Information.

What kind of problems?

Firstly, a volunteer may have a complaint about another volunteer, or a staff member, or about the organisation itself.

Secondly, you may have concerns about a volunteer. These may be about

a) Capability: a volunteer's ability to undertake the role. There may be health issues or personal risk factors to consider. They may not have the level of skill, knowledge or experience required

b) Performance: can a volunteer fulfil the basic requirements of their role, as described on the role description? (You may first want to explore whether or not there are relevant capability issues). Concerns might include bad timekeeping,

acting beyond the bounds of the role, neglecting to complete health and safety checks or essential documentation

c) Conduct: how a volunteer behaves whilst volunteering, for example being disrespectful to clients, misusing the organisation's property, bullying, or serious breaches of organisational policies

Thirdly, someone else may have complained to you about a volunteer, raising one or more areas of concern.

If a serious allegation is made or serious misconduct is witnessed, you will need to act swiftly. In cases of alleged criminal offences such as assault, theft, financial fraud, or where there are safeguarding concerns, then the matter may need to be referred immediately to other authorities, such as the police, or a safeguarding officer.

In other cases, your usual channels of communication through 'catch up sessions' 'review meetings' or 'supervision' to provide the opportunity to address, confidentially, any issues as they arise.

a) Managing complaints

There should be a clear and well defined route for complaints to be taken up. Initially these are likely to be taken to the volunteer manager. This is likely to be an oral complaint, raised informally. If not resolved, it should be raised in writing and addressed to a more senior member of staff.

Your written procedures need to be tailored to your own organisation. They need to give definite timescales as to when a volunteer must take the matter to the next stage, should they wish, and by when they can expect a formal reply.

Be prepared to offer support and flexibility if volunteers have difficulty in submitting their concern in writing. Volunteers should have the option of being accompanied by a friend or companion if a one to one meeting is arranged

Aim to resolve complaints quickly, fairly and openly so as to:

- Protect volunteers
- Minimise disruption to staff, service users and volunteers
- Demonstrate respect for volunteers
- Protect the reputation of your organisation

Your final step will be the right of appeal in which the volunteer might, if unhappy with the outcome of their written complaint, take the matter to the highest level, the Board of Trustees. Most usually this is addressed to the Chair. The Chair's decision will be final.

Your organisation may have complaints procedures in place which are appropriate for volunteers and staff.

b) Managing concerns raised about volunteer's conduct

First level approach – supervision

Good supervision allows you to deal with any problems at the earliest stage, and should be in place on a regular basis before issues arise.

A volunteer may be unaware of what is expected, or of procedures to follow. There may be confusion about role boundaries. No one can improve or change unless an issue is brought to their attention and they understand how you want them to act differently. Remind the volunteer of relevant policies, codes of behaviour or ground rules agreed.

A volunteer's engagement with their role may have declined. Supervision may reveal the true reasons, whether disillusion, boredom, frustration, or personal or health issues that are unrelated to their volunteering.

This may be an opportunity to review whether there is a more suitable role for the volunteer within your organisation or whether there are adaptations that you can make to improve the situation. Would additional training or support help the matter? Would moving to a different team or taking on a different activity make a difference? Do they need a break from volunteering?

In some situations of conflict or disagreement, an external facilitator or mediator might be approached to work with relevant parties.

In some cases you may both feel that referral to your local volunteer centre with a view to seeking a different volunteer placement is the best way forward.

Keep notes of your meeting so that you can show evidence, if necessary, that you have taken a fair and reasonable approach.

If informal measures are agreed, keep them under review. If there is no positive change after an agreed period, a more formal process may be necessary.

Second level approach – formal procedures

Such procedures are useful, even if you never have to use them, as they makes clear to everyone that you are committed to seeking fair resolution and will not simply ignore difficult situations when they arise. You may include these within your volunteer policy, or as a separate policy. Either way, they should be easy to understand.

Just as there is a series of steps to follow in handling complaints, similarly there may be a series of steps for addressing concerns about a volunteer's conduct.

If the issue is not resolved after informal discussion and review, then a more formal meeting may be held and the volunteer invited to bring a friend for support. A more senior staff member may also be involved at this stage.

Explain your concerns and allow the volunteer to state their case.

A written warning may be issued, outlining the reasons for concern. Further objectives may be set, and reviewed after a stated period.

In cases of gross misconduct, a volunteer may be asked to stop volunteering immediately, whilst an investigation is carried out. What your organisation regards as 'gross misconduct' should be spelt out in a relevant policy document and communicated to volunteers and staff.

The list might include:

- Theft, malicious damage
- Violent or inappropriate sexual behaviour
- Harassment or bullying
- Breach of confidentiality
- Being under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Deliberate falsification of documents or record

Ensure that the volunteer has the right of appeal. Sometimes a subcommittee may be formed to hear an appeal. Often one or more members of the Trustee Board would be involved.

Ending a volunteer's placement

Terminating a volunteer's placement with you may be necessary as a last resort, when other avenues have been fully explored and a situation remains unresolved.

In this case:

Hold the meeting in a private setting. The volunteer may choose to be accompanied.

- Be quick and direct. Do not attempt to counsel the volunteer at this stage
- Be prepared for an emotional response, but maintain control of your own emotions
- Follow up with a letter, repeating the decision and the reasons why
- Inform staff, service users and volunteers of your decision – there is no need to give the reasons
- Ensure that anything for which the volunteer was responsible is followed up by someone else

Information sheet 4.22 'Managing Volunteer Exits', covers 'counselling out' and 'letting volunteers go'.

Pastoral Care

Dealing with difficult situations can be stressful for all parties involved. You may want to consider the needs of the following:

a) **The volunteer -** you may want to ensure that there are sources of support available to them. In serious cases this may best come from outside of your organisation.

b) **Other volunteers** – agree a clear message about what has happened, which does not betray confidences. Aim to bring reassurance to other volunteers and 'closure' as soon as possible.

c) **The complainant** – may be upset or feel guilty if their complaint has led to serious consequences. Keep them informed of what is happening, offering reassurance if necessary

d) **Staff -** an incident may undermine confidence of staff about involving volunteers generally. Isolated difficult situations should not be allowed to undermine the positive contributions of volunteers.

Final comments

Your organisation may be small, and you may not want to draw up detailed problem solving procedures. However difficult issues may still arise. It is wise to give some thought as to how these will be addressed, and to make these known.

It may be helpful to involve volunteers in the discussion about this.

Further information

Other relevant WCVA/CVC information sheets:
4.7 How to ensure volunteer satisfaction
4.15 Supporting harder to place volunteers
4.22 Managing volunteer exits

The Investing in Volunteers Standard requires that volunteers are advised how the organisation will address situations where the volunteer has behaved inappropriately (Indicator 7.4) and that volunteers are advised of the procedure to use if they wish to complain about their treatment by paid staff, users, committee members or other volunteers (Indicator 7.5).

Mediation services may be available in your area.
ACAS can offer help in resolving disputes within the workplace.
Your local County Voluntary Council or Volunteer Centre may be able to offer advice and support.

Disclaimer
The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

For further information contact

Powys Association of Voluntary Organisations
Unit 30, Ddole Road Enterprise Park, Llandrindod Wells, Powys, LD1 6DF
Registered Charity: *1069557*

Tel: 01597 822191 info@pavo.org.uk
Fax: 01597 828675 www.pavo.org.uk

Produced by WCVA, County Voluntary Councils and Volunteer Centres.
Last Updated:07/02/2017

Cyngor Gweithredu Gwirfoddol Cymru
wcva
Wales Council for Voluntary Action
Tel: 0800 2888 329
www.wcva.org.uk