



# 4.0 Volunteers

## Managing Concerns Relating to Volunteers

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This information sheet provides guidance on how to respond to concerns relating to volunteers.

### Introduction

Whilst the involvement of volunteers is usually a positive experience for all concerned, sometimes things can 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.



Image: Group of people having a meeting

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

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

#### 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.

#### 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 unreliability,

Acting beyond the bounds of the role, refusal to complete health and safety checks or essential documentation as requested.

#### Conduct

How a volunteer behaves whilst volunteering, for example being disrespectful to clients/public/team members, 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 which warrants further enquiry.

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 social services.

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

### 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 progressed, 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 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.

### Managing Concerns Raised About a 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.

There 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 be made 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 warning may be issued, in written form, outlining the reasons for concern. Further objectives may be set with a commitment to review 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
- Safeguarding breach
- Breach of confidentiality
- Being under the influence of drugs or alcohol
- Deliberate falsification of documents or records

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, 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 which the volunteer was responsible for is followed up by someone else



For more information on counselling out and letting volunteers see information sheet:

**4.22 Managing Volunteer Exits**

### Pastoral Care

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

#### 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.

#### 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.

#### 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

#### 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 so as to prevent inconsistent and unfair practices emerging. It may be helpful to involve volunteers in the discussion about this.

## Further Information

### Volunteer Centres

#### Third Sector Support Wales

<https://thirdsectorsupport.wales/>

Mediation services may be available in your area. Your local County Voluntary Council or Volunteer Centre may be able to offer advice and support.

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### Investing in Volunteers - Standards

#### Investing in Volunteers

<https://iiv.investinginvolunteers.org.uk/download-the-standard>

### Additional Information Sheets

#### Third Sector Support Wales

4.7 How to Ensure Volunteer Satisfaction

4.15 Involving Volunteers with Additional Support Needs

4.22 Managing Volunteer Exits



Cefnogi Trydydd  
Sector **Cymru**

Third Sector  
Support **Wales**

Third Sector Support Wales is a network of support organisations for the whole of the third sector in Wales.

It consists of the 19 local and regional support bodies across Wales, the County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) and the national support body, Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA).

For further information contact  
<https://thirdsectorsupport.wales/contact/>

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### 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.