Community Action: MK
promote·support·engage·involve

Volunteering Management:
Solving Problems with Volunteers

What to do if things go wrong

Volunteers bring many benefits to organisations, but sometimes there are problems. Taking fast, fair action to solve issues reduces the risk that volunteers will leave. It also reduces risks to the organisation's reputation.

Identify problems

Problems you might face with your volunteers could include:

- volunteers struggling to do what the role asks
- volunteers doing too much and feeling overwhelmed
- difficult behaviour, such as not getting on with others or not turning up when they say they will
- volunteers being unhappy with things the organisation is doing or not doing.

More serious problems carry a reputational risk to the organisation. These could include:

- bullying or harassment
- sharing confidential data
- fraud or stealing funds
- being under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Problems with volunteers often aren't very different to problems with paid staff. But you'll need to handle them in a different way.

Have a problem-solving process

It's important to have a problem-solving process for volunteers. This makes it clear to staff and volunteers what to do if something goes wrong.

This should be separate from a disciplinary and grievance process for paid staff. It can link to your complaints process, which you should share with your volunteers.

Your problem-solving process should cover:

1. who the problem-solving process is for

2. what's seen as a problem, so everyone is clear when the process will apply
3. who is responsible for handling different kinds of complaints
4. steps to the process, such as fact-finding, an initial meeting, followed by a review meeting, and who is responsible for these
5. what happens if problems continue
6. what happens in the case of serious breaches in conduct
7. how volunteers can appeal any decisions they're unhappy with.

Share this process with your volunteers during their induction, to ensure they're aware of it.

Investigate the problem

Talk to the volunteer and find out the facts. If the problem involves several volunteers, try to speak to all involved.
If you are investigating a problem:

- avoid taking sides
- listen to what people have to say
- don't become defensive
- try to stick to facts
- avoid blame.

Once you understand the issue, you can work out the best course of action.
If it's difficult for you to remain fair and objective, involve someone else in the process.

Take action

Explain to the volunteer what the problem is and the impact it has had. They may be unaware of the issue and drawing their attention to it could fix things.

Avoid blaming the volunteer, as the problem may not be their fault. Approach it as trying to tackle the problem together.

Decide with the volunteer what they would like to happen and how you'll try to solve the problem. Involving volunteers in the solution will help make it a success.
Finally, agree when and how you will review progress.

Source:NCVO

Possible solutions

Be flexible and open to doing things in a different way. Here are some solutions you could try.

- Re-explain the role and expectations. A reminder of the role, its boundaries and what you expect from the volunteer may solve the issue.
- Offer more support or training. Sometimes it takes people a little longer to learn new skills. If the volunteer is struggling with their role or part of it, they might need more support.
- Change their tasks. If a task is causing an issue, see if someone else could do it or if the volunteer could do it in another way. Other resources could also help.
- Offer another role. If the role isn't meeting the volunteer's expectations, see if they can support you in another way. Set a time frame for trying out any new roles, approaches or behaviour.

If the problem continues

If the problem doesn't improve, you'll need to try another solution. Set a time to review things again.

You'll need to be clear with the volunteer what will happen if the problem isn't solved. For more serious problems, you might need to dismiss the volunteer.

If there's no improvement, it's likely the volunteer will decide to leave by themselves. Try to handle this as well as possible. Make sure they are clear about the process and what you've done to try and solve the problem.

See NCVO [guidance on dismissing a volunteer](#).

Learning and improving

Problems are an opportunity to learn and think about how to do things better. This will help you avoid issues in future.

1. Check that your roles meet volunteer expectations. Is it clear in your volunteer agreement what they're being asked to do and how?
2. Review how you recruit volunteers. Do you expect them to come with certain skills or abilities and do you check this?
3. Make sure your induction and training covers what it needs to. You should also check that volunteers find it useful.

Source:NCVO

4. Make sure the support volunteers get is right for the role they do. Check that your policies and processes are easy to find and understand.

5. Make sure volunteers hear about what they need to, when they need to. Communicate with them in clear language, without lots of jargon.