



# Volunteer Guidance - Problem-Solving Procedure

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## Purpose of Best Practice Guidance

We have a procedure in place for handling concerns that a volunteer manager may have about a volunteer's actions, or ability to carry out a role. We use this to ensure that we treat volunteers fairly and consistently. We call our procedure 'problem solving' because our assumption is that most issues can be resolved, and we look to find a way forward that involves the volunteer in determining the solution.

This guidance gives volunteers additional information about the process, and supplements the Problem-Solving Procedure.

In most cases, if there is a concern about something you have done, we would try to resolve it informally. This might simply be a conversation letting you know where there is an issue, or some additional support.

If a problem cannot be resolved informally, or is of a more serious nature, we would then use the formal procedure.

## Definitions:

**Improvement plan** - plan to resolve a problem, agreed with a volunteer.

**Problem-solver** - the staff member responsible for following the Problem-Solving Procedure. This is usually, but does not have to be, the volunteer's volunteer manager.

**Problem-Solving Procedure** - informal name for the Volunteer Management Procedure - Problem-Solving.



**Reviewer** - the staff member responsible for the stage two review of an initial decision.

**Serious concerns** - actions that caused, or could have caused, clear harm to people, property, or Guide Dogs as an organisation.

**Volunteer manager** - the key contact for a volunteer, responsible for their experience while in a specific volunteer role.

**Companion** - a friend, family member or fellow volunteer who accompanies the volunteer to meetings held under the procedure.

## **Best Practice Guidance Information**

### **When a problem has been raised formally**

You would be told that the procedure is being used. The staff member resolving the problem will usually be your normal volunteer manager, although there may be some cases where another member of staff is asked to work through the procedure with you. We use the term 'problem-solver' to reflect that it may not be your volunteer manager.

If we consider the problem to be a 'serious concern' - see below - we will ask you to temporarily step back from volunteering until the issue is resolved.

The problem solver will arrange a meeting with you to discuss the problem. If you wish, you can be accompanied at this meeting by a friend, family member or fellow volunteer. Please see appendix 2 for more information about the role of such a companion.

Before the meeting, think through what you would like to say during it. You may want to make some notes.

At the meeting, the problem solver will talk through the issue or incident with you. They will give you a chance to put your side of things across, explain what happened, and raise any other factors that contributed to the problem (e.g. you had been asked to do a task that you hadn't ever been trained in).

We try to reach a resolution at the meeting, although this is not always possible. The problem solver may decide that you have done nothing



wrong, and close the procedure. Or they may decide that there's a need to agree a way forward to resolve the issue. If this is the case, they will put together an 'improvement plan' with you. This will set out what you and/or Guide Dogs might do to resolve the problem.

For some issues, the problem solver may continue to look into the problem based on what you have said at the meeting. They may also need to consult with appropriate staff on the best way forward. Where this is the case, they will let you know when they expect to reach a conclusion.

## **Improvement plans**

What is in the improvement plan will depend on the nature of the problem. It might simply be that we ask you not to repeat the behaviour. It could be that we will provide you with more support to help you better carry out a particular task. The improvement plan will come with a review date.

The improvement plan is something we ask you to agree with. The problem solver is likely to have an idea of how the issue can be resolved, but will listen to you and your own ideas. For example, if the problem was to do with how well you carry out a particular part of the role, you may have a clear sense of what support you might need to improve. You are free to disagree with a proposed plan, but if this is the case we do ask that you work with us to find an alternative that still adequately addresses the problem.

If you do not agree to an improvement plan and/or fail to engage in this process (e.g. by not attending agreed meetings without a valid reason) and we cannot offer an alternative that we are satisfied meets our concerns, this means there is a problem we cannot resolve, and we will be unable to continue your volunteering relationship.

When you meet for a review of progress under the plan, there are three potential outcomes:

- The plan has been successfully completed



- The plan will be extended - there has been progress, but more time is needed to fully resolve things. An extended plan will be agreed with you. This might simply be the same interventions given more time, or it could be that some different actions or activities are suggested.
- The plan has not been successfully completed. Where this is the case we will have to bring the volunteer relationship to an end.

It is possible that plans could be extended for other reasons - e.g. absence or other circumstances meant that something in the plan could not be completed under the initial timeline. In general though, this will be agreed with you prior to the scheduled review meeting.

### **Other problems arising during the improvement plan period.**

If another problem is identified during an improvement plan, the problem-solver will initially consider it under the scope of the plan, making a decision as to whether it represents a failure to show improvement. For example, if a plan was in place due to a volunteer being rude to another volunteer, and another incident of unacceptable behaviour came up, the problem-solver could decide that this means the improvement plan has failed, leading to an ending of the volunteer relationship.

### **Serious concerns**

We refer to some problems as 'serious concerns'. These are issues where, should we be satisfied that the volunteer's action did fall into that category, they are not suitable to volunteer with us.

Serious concerns include actions that caused, or could have caused, clear harm to people, property, or Guide Dogs as an organisation. Harm can take many forms - physical, emotional, financial or reputational. For example, harm or abuse directed towards children or adults, theft, or cruelty to dogs. We set out further examples within the Procedure, but please note that this list is not exhaustive.

Where we believe a serious concern may have arisen, we will ask you to temporarily stop volunteering while we look into the issue.



As with any problem, we would invite you to a meeting to talk through the issue or incident, and listen to your perspective. You can choose to be accompanied at this meeting.

If we decide that something you did does amount to a serious concern, we will ask you to stop volunteering with us on a permanent basis.

Other conclusions include finding that you did not do anything wrong, or that the issue and/or your involvement was not as serious as we believed it could have been, in which case we may put in place an improvement plan.

### **If we ask you to stop volunteering**

This is an outcome we always try to avoid, but sometimes ending a volunteer relationship is a decision we have to take.

If this decision was taken because we felt you lacked the right skills or ability for the role, please understand that this is never a comment on you personally. Some people simply aren't a good fit for a particular type of activity. We try to avoid coming to this point by using a carefully considered recruitment and selection process and providing additional support or training if an issue arises after this, but ultimately as a charity whose mission is to provide support for people with sight loss, we have to take such tough decisions.

If we have ended the volunteering relationship because we felt that your behaviour was incompatible with our work or behaviours, we understand that this may be something you disagree with. However, these are decisions we do not take lightly. We have a number of responsibilities, around staff and volunteers, our service-users, our resources, our reputation, and compliance with external regulation. We also have expectations of our volunteers, and where these aren't met, and a reasonable resolution cannot be reached, therefore believe we are justified in asking a volunteer to leave us.

We do offer the opportunity to ask for a review of the decision as a safeguard against a mistake or misjudgement.



## **Return of equipment and ID Card**

If you choose to leave or are asked to leave during this process, we will request equipment and your ID card to be returned. You will also receive a moving on email with a link to a feedback survey. Despite the reason someone might be leaving us, it's important to us to receive feedback to help us understand the experiences of our volunteers and allow us to continuously improve.

## **Volunteers in more than one role**

If we ask you to stop volunteering, this may mean that you will have to stop volunteering in all your roles.

Our decision will depend on the nature of the issue. If we felt that your behaviour had been unacceptable, that would affect any role you have with us. Where the problem was around your ability to carry out a role, it is less likely to affect others. We know that not everyone is suitable for every role. There may however need to be a discussion about this where a particular problem was relevant to other roles.

## **Asking for a decision to be reviewed**

If we ask you to leave, either because an improvement plan was not successfully concluded, or because of a serious concern, you will be given details of who to contact for a review of the decision, should you wish to pursue this course of action.

You will have to show that there are grounds for a review - this is not an automatic step in the problem-solving procedure. Disagreeing with the outcome of the initial stage in the process is not enough for a review to be opened. We can only review where it appears that the process has been flawed.

This would include one or more of the following:

- Not all relevant information was considered
- The issue under consideration was not something that presented a genuine problem
- The conclusion or the proposed resolution to the problem were unreasonable given the circumstances.
- The Procedure was incorrectly followed



- Your accessibility needs were not properly considered, meaning you could not play a full part in the process

Do be aware that citing something above does not guarantee a review. For example, you might argue that the issue raised was not a genuine problem, but the reviewer will have the perspective of Guide Dogs policies, expectations of volunteers, external regulations and so on. So stating that taking a certain action was not a problem because there were no negative consequences is not a sufficient justification for a review if the action was clearly outside your role description, was something you had been told not to do, or could have presented a risk to others.

It is also possible that the reviewer agrees that there was a minor flaw in the process, but does not consider this enough to call the overall decision into question. For example: our timeframes were not met, and we did not give adequate notice and revised timelines. This is a breach of the Procedure. A reviewer may decide that this is something we should apologise for, but that this did not affect the fairness of the decision.

## **Final stage review**

If you believe that the decision made at review stage was again flawed, you can ask for a final review, carried out by the Head of Volunteering.

This stage is included as a safeguard against serious mistakes made earlier in the process. As with the earlier stage two review, it is not enough to disagree with an outcome. You must show that there are reasonable grounds for looking at the decision - for example:

- Not all relevant information was considered
- The procedure was incorrectly followed
- Your accessibility needs were not properly considered, meaning you could not play a full part in the process



The final stage review cannot reinvestigate the issue. The Head of Volunteering will consider whether or not the process was followed, and whether actions and decisions appear to have been fair and reasonable.

As with stage two, it is possible for this review to find that there may have been mistakes in the implementation of the procedure that nevertheless do not call the decisions made into question.

If significant flaws are found, the Head of Volunteering will ask for the issue to be considered at a stage two level again. The decision made at that stage will be final.

## **Appendix 1 - Frequently Asked Questions**

### **I'm a volunteer - why is this necessary?**

What volunteers do matters. We normally think of this in a positive sense, but this also means that organisations must address concerns that something isn't working right with a volunteer, because it does have an impact. For example, if a volunteer isn't competently completing the tasks of a role, or if their behaviour is not in line with expected standards, there are consequences for Guide Dogs, and how able we are to achieve our aims.

As an organisation, we are working to support people with sight loss to live the life they choose. We engage volunteers as a valued part of this work, so it's therefore important to us that we can resolve problems if they do arise.

Volunteers do not have the same employment protections as paid workers, but we believe that in the absence of legal rights we have an ethical obligation to ensure that we are able to handle problems fairly, transparently, and consistently. That is why we have our Problem-Solving Procedure. Both staff and volunteers involved in the process should know how an issue will be handled, and what the next steps will be.





### **Can I be accompanied at a meeting?**

Yes. This can be a fellow volunteer, friend or family member. We refer to someone doing this as a companion, They are there to provide you with moral support, so should not speak for you, but can check that you have said everything you wanted to say, that you understand or agree with a statement or outcome, and suggest a pause if you need one. We have included more information about the role of this companion in appendix 2.

The exception to this would be if someone speaking for you would ensure that your perspective is put forward - e.g. if you have anxiety and would find advocating for yourself too hard. This must be agreed with us in advance.

### **Does a meeting have to be face-to-face?**

We will take your preferences into account, as well as practicalities such as travel distance or accessibility for you and/or the problem-solver. The meeting may be virtual, where this is more practical for either party, or where this is your preference. Telephone calls may be used with your agreement.

### **What happens if I'm on holiday during one of the stages, or need to rearrange a meeting?**

Having a holiday or other planned absence is absolutely fine, just let us know when you will be available, and the problem-solver or reviewer can revise their timeline.

We understand that sometimes there can be unexpected demands on your availability, but if you need to rearrange a planned meeting, please try to give us reasonable notice.

### **What happens if, at the end of stage one, the problem-solver decides there is a problem to be resolved?**

The purpose of the procedure is to try to resolve issues, not to blame or otherwise make a negative judgement against a volunteer. We will agree a 'volunteer improvement plan' with you - basically the next steps to resolve the issue. Sometimes the steps will be for the



volunteer manager - for example, they may arrange for you to have some additional support.

### **Do I have to participate in this process?**

Yes. We understand that you may disagree with the decision to start this process, and/or the outcome reached by it. However the procedure allows you the opportunity to put forward your perspective and any considerations or evidence you feel we should take into account. This can be followed by a review if it appears that the initial decision or process was flawed.

We expect volunteers to both follow our policies and procedures and show respect to the people they work alongside. Refusing to attend a meeting to discuss the issue, or otherwise avoiding participation is in itself unacceptable behaviour, and if you do not have a valid reason for, e.g. not attending a meeting, then we may consider that a decision on your part to end the volunteering relationship.

### **Do I have to agree to a volunteer improvement plan?**

You can challenge the contents of a plan, but you must show why you believe they are not necessary, and/or suggest an alternative. We will consider alternative proposals, but the volunteer manager has to agree that they are suitable.

If you reject a plan outright, or we cannot come to a reasonable agreement on a plan, we will consider you to have ended the volunteering relationship, although you may be entitled to seek a review.

### **What if I disagree with a decision?**

Our review stages are there to provide an opportunity to look over a previous decision. Please note though that we can only offer a review if there appear to be valid reasons why the process has been flawed. This decision is in the hands of the named reviewer.

Make sure that when you ask for a review you are providing a justification - we cannot devote staff time to reviewing simply because of a disagreement with the outcome, but where something specific is identified that could suggest a mistake has been made, we will look



into it. We have set out the criteria for a review, but if you believe there is a reason why a review is needed that isn't listed, you can use this, again with an explanation of why it means it would be reasonable to re-examine the process and decision.

**Does a decision made under this procedure stay on my volunteer record, and if so:**

- **does that mean I could be restricted if I wanted to move into a new role, or take on additional responsibilities within my current role?**
- **could it form part of decision-making in a subsequent problem-solving process?**

We do keep a record of the procedure. Full details of this are kept securely, and will only be made accessible to someone with a valid reason in line with data protection regulations.

Having been through this procedure does not mean you would automatically be considered unsuitable for other roles or additional responsibilities.

It is possible that the nature of the issue could have particular significance to a different role, or where we are asking volunteers to help support, train or mentor other volunteers. However we would also take into account your engagement with an improvement plan and any progress since that point.

It is possible that a previous issue could be taken into account by a subsequent problem-solving procedure, but this would only be on one of two grounds:

- If the same issue has arisen again
- If there appears to be an ongoing series of problems that have had to be addressed over time.



## **Appendix 2 - Accompanying volunteers to meetings under the complaints or problem-solving procedures**

We allow volunteers to be accompanied when attending meetings under our complaints or problem-solving procedures. These guidelines set out expectations of the person supporting a volunteer - we'll refer to this as being a 'companion' in the text below.

### **The overall role of a companion**

You are there to provide emotional support to the volunteer. We know that such meetings can be stressful, which is both damaging in itself, but it can also get in the way of someone being able to fully express themselves.

Please note that you are not there to speak for the volunteer, or to act as an advocate. We can agree in advance that a volunteer may need an additional level of support (e.g. where they have a learning disability, or social anxiety), but this is a specific arrangement, and not part of the expectations of a companion.

### **How meetings are arranged**

These meetings can be in different formats, depending on both practicalities and the preferences of the volunteer.

- Face to face
- Online
- Telephone

In most cases you should be present with the volunteer - you could join an online meeting from a separate location, but this lessens the impact you could have.

We give volunteers at least 5 working days' notice for a meeting. We are happy to rearrange timings to enable a volunteer to be accompanied, but please try to ensure that you will be able to attend - we understand that sometimes the unexpected arises, but we try to keep our process timely to avoid further stress on the volunteer.



### **Before the meeting**

If you can, have a conversation with the volunteer about the meeting, how they are feeling about it, and what they want to say during it. As we've said, as a companion your role isn't to speak for the volunteer, but if you are aware of what they want to get across, the key points that they want to make, it's ok to remind them during the meeting.

### **During the meeting**

There will be a member of staff hosting the meeting, and they may be accompanied by a colleague to help with note taking. The volunteer should be informed in advance of who will be present.

We know that this might not be a pleasant experience, whether a volunteer is reliving a situation they are complaining about, or whether we are asking questions about something they did that we have concerns over.

As these meetings are a chance for the volunteer to have their say, whether in relation to a complaint they are raising, or a concern we have around their behaviour or ability, your role is to support the volunteer to fully express themselves.

### **What support could look like**

You may not need to play an active role at all - often the presence of someone else is support enough. However, your support could include:

- keeping an eye on the volunteer's wellbeing - for example noticing that they are upset and might need a little break to compose themselves.
- checking that they've said everything they wanted to say about a particular issue or in response to a question. If you are aware that there was a point they wanted to raise during the meeting, you can remind them of this.
- checking that they understand what the next steps are, or if a decision is made at the meeting, that they are aware of its implications, and what to do if they disagree with the outcome.



Again, you are not there to speak or advocate for the volunteer unless agreed in advance.

Remember that in emotionally charged situations it's easy for your voice to be raised, and/or for your tone or language to come across as aggressive, even if that isn't your intention. Just as we want to support our volunteer's wellbeing, we also support that of our staff. Therefore if you repeatedly speak for the volunteer, or intervene in a way that makes the staff member uncomfortable, they can end the meeting.

### **Your wellbeing**

We've acknowledged how stressful or emotionally draining it can be for a volunteer to attend such meetings - it's also true for their companion.

We do firstly want to make you aware that this could be the case.

If you are also a current volunteer, you can access our wellbeing resources on the [Volunteer Information Point \(VIP\)](#).

If you are outside Guide Dogs, you may find some of these resources helpful.

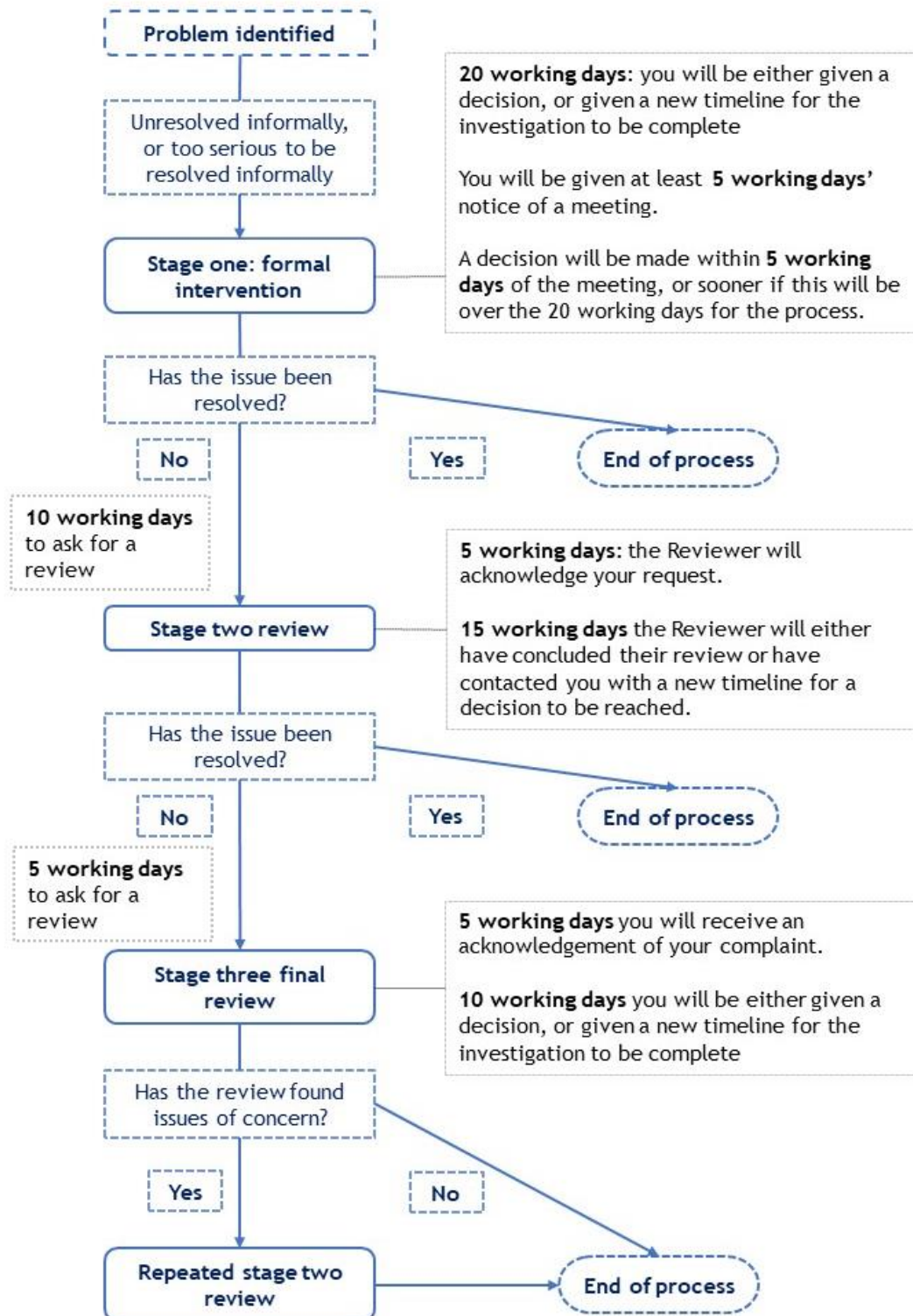
- [NHS mental health guides, tools and activities](#)
- [Mind's mental health wellbeing resources](#)
- [Free resources on the Calm app website](#)

### **Lastly, thank you**

We want our processes to resolve concerns to be as fair and reasonable as possible. Supporting a volunteer at a meeting helps them to fully participate, so thank you for agreeing to help them.

## Appendix 3 - Process and timelines

This flowchart is followed by the same information in text form.







## Written summary of process and timelines

### Informal resolution

Most **problems** should be raised informally. If the issue is not resolved, or is of a serious nature, it can be taken to stage one.

### Stage one formal intervention

**Within 20 working days** you will be either given a decision, or given a new timeline for the investigation to be complete.

You will be given at least **5 working days'** notice of a meeting.

A decision will be made within **5 working days** of the meeting, or sooner if that would be over the 20 working days for the process

If you wish to request a review, you must do this within **10 working days** of receiving the decision.

### Stage two review

**Within 5 working days** of asking for a review the reviewer will acknowledge your request.

**Within 15 working days** of asking for a review the reviewer will either have concluded their review or have contacted you with a new timeline for a decision to be reached.

If you wish to request a final review, you must do this within **5 working days** of receiving the decision.

### Stage three final review

**Within 5 working days** of asking for a review the Head of Volunteering will acknowledge your request.

**Within 10 working days** of asking for a review the Head of Volunteering will either have concluded their review or have contacted you with a new timeline for a decision to be reached.

If the Head of Volunteering finds that the problem has been handled fairly and in line with the procedure, their decision is final.





If they find that there have been problems with the handling of the problem, the problem will be passed on for the equivalent of a stage two review. This will be subject to the stage two timelines. The decision of the reviewer at this stage will be final.

Documentation:

N/A

### **Permissible exceptions:**

Any investigation related to compliance (safeguarding, health and safety, data protection) or other legal matters (e.g. a potential criminal offence) will take precedence over the timelines within this procedure, during which time all volunteering by the individual volunteer will be paused.

### **Related documents**

Volunteer Management Procedure - Problem-solving



## Governance Information.

### Governance Review & Approval Table:

The table below contains two rows and five columns.

Governance Area:	H&S	Protection of Children & Adults	Insurance	Legal	GDPR
Date Approved:		28 Jan 2025			

### Review Frequency:

Best Practice Guidance: Annually

Reviews should be done in accordance with relevant regulation, legislation changes or as a result of ad hoc activity, such as continuous improvement initiatives.

### Version control table:

The table below contains four rows and four columns.

Date	Version	Status	Details of Change
29 Jan 2025	1.0	Approved	New document. Replacing BAA procedures.

**End of document**