



# Volunteer Management Procedure - Volunteer complaints

Unique reference number: VOL-PR-036

Document Owner: Mark Restall, Volunteering Good Practice Specialist

Version: 5.2

## Purpose of Procedure

This procedure is designed to help resolve concerns raised by current volunteers or applicants to volunteer roles. While volunteers do not have the legal protections of employees, we understand that sometimes things can go wrong, and therefore our general complaints process is open to volunteers, as it is to service users and members of the public. This procedure sets out how we handle volunteer complaints once raised.

It should give staff and volunteers a clear understanding of how such complaints will be dealt with and help ensure consistency and transparency for the handling of volunteer complaints, no matter where they arise within Guide Dogs.

## Definitions:

- **Investigating Manager** - the staff member leading the initial investigation under stage one of the procedure.
- **Reviewer** - the staff member handling a stage two review of the initial decision.
- **Volunteer complaints procedure** - informal name for the Volunteer Management Procedure - Volunteer Complaints.
- **Volunteer manager** - the key contact for a volunteer, responsible for their experience while in a specific volunteer role.
- **Appropriate volunteering adviser** - a member of staff with responsibility for supporting volunteering within a directorate.
- **Problem-solving procedure** - our procedure for resolving concerns about a volunteer's behaviour or capability within a role (formally referred to as the 'BAA procedure').

- **Companion** - a friend, family member or fellow volunteer who accompanies a volunteer to meetings related to their complaint. They provide emotional support to the volunteer, but (unless agreed in advance as necessary to ensure the process is inclusive and accessible) do not advocate or speak for the volunteer

## **Roles and responsibilities**

The **Volunteering Good Practice Specialist** is the owner of this procedure which sets the national standard. If required, they will provide procedural support or good practice advice to the appropriate volunteering adviser.

The **Complaints Team** is responsible for the allocation of complaints received through the Guide Dogs Complaints Process, and opening a complaints file for the recording of actions taken under the volunteer complaints procedure.

**Operations Volunteering Experience Lead** - responsible for providing appropriate volunteering advisers to support investigating managers and others within the operations directorate to implement this procedure.

**Fundraising Volunteering Development Lead** - responsible for providing appropriate volunteering advisers to support investigating managers and others within the fundraising directorate to implement this procedure.

**All staff** are responsible for complaints handling and the recording of complaints through the Guide Dogs Complaints Process.

**Staff allocated specific roles** in investigating or reviewing volunteer complaints are responsible for ensuring the procedure is correctly implemented and that volunteer concerns are properly considered. This should be staff within the directorate for which the complaint relates to, unless it reaches a stage 3 final review, in which case the Head of Volunteering will lead the investigation.

## **Procedure Instructions**

### **Safeguarding or serious incidents**

- If a complaint or investigation raises any safeguarding concerns are suspected the staff member involved should telephone The

Safeguarding Team on 0345 1430199, who will advise as to next steps.

- If a serious incident such as fraud or criminal activity is suspected the staff member involved should follow the [Serious Incident Reporting Procedure](#). If there are any doubts the Association Secretary should be consulted:

[associationsecretary@guidedogs.org.uk](mailto:associationsecretary@guidedogs.org.uk)

In these cases, the volunteer complaints procedure may need to be suspended pending the outcome of any serious incident or safeguarding investigations.

### **Inclusion statement**

If it is not already on record, the volunteer should be asked for their preferred format for communication, and this should be followed at all stages of the procedure. This means recording it within records of the complaint, to ensure that a subsequent reviewer also has this information.

### **Resolving issues informally**

We ask that volunteers who have concerns try to resolve them informally in the first instance, where this is appropriate.

Conversations between volunteers and their managers are important, both for general support and guidance, but also in dealing with minor problems quickly and easily.

Concerns that have not been resolved informally or are of a serious nature should be pursued according to this procedure. Complaints raised under it will be investigated and logged.

## **Stage one complaint**

### **Raising a complaint**

Complaints should be raised with the volunteer manager - the person responsible for supporting the volunteer. If the complaint relates to the volunteer manager, then their line manager, or another member of staff either from the same team or one which is also local may be contacted. The Volunteering Office can inform who the appropriate manager is if required.

Where possible complaints should be in writing, as this means we have a clear record right from the beginning of the process. Where this is not practical, a staff member must make a note of the verbal complaint and confirm its contents with the volunteer.

Complaints must be recorded by the staff member who received it, through the complaints form on Pawtal. The Complaints Team will decide on an appropriate 'Investigating Manager'. The investigating manager must respond to the volunteer acknowledging the formal complaint within 5 working days. Where possible this should also suggest an appropriate time/location for an initial meeting with the complainant.

The investigating manager must maintain a full record of the complaint, including timelines, notes of meetings, actions and communications.

### **Initial meeting**

There is an assumption that an initial meeting will be held, unless the volunteer agrees this is not necessary (for example, the nature of the complaint is very clear and specific, or they have already given a full account to the same staff member when they raised the complaint).

- For current volunteers, the meeting may be face to face or virtual, on agreement with the volunteer. Telephone calls may be used with the agreement of the volunteer.
- For applicants, the meeting will usually be held virtually/by phone.

- At any meeting as part of this process volunteers can be accompanied at the meeting by a friend, family member, or fellow volunteer - a 'companion'. They will be able to provide emotional support, but, unless otherwise agreed, cannot speak for the volunteer. The volunteer and volunteer manager guidance documents on the complaints policy include further information, which should be shared with the companion.

### **Complaint outcome**

The investigating staff member will make a decision within 15 working days. Where this is not possible, they must contact the volunteer with an explanation, and a new timeline for the investigation to be concluded.

The decision will be given in a meeting (this may be either in person or online), but it must also be put in writing.

If the complaint is not upheld, the volunteer must be told about the opportunity to ask for a review and given the details of an appropriate manager who will act as reviewer.

If it is upheld, the volunteer should be told what actions will be taken as a result. For confidentiality reasons we cannot disclose what actions have been taken in regard to individuals.

Actions/outcomes should a complaint be upheld should be appropriate to remedy the issue raised. The wishes of the volunteer must be taken into account but may not be met where the proposed action is disproportionate or beyond our control (e.g., they involve a third party).

### **Complaints raised about another volunteer**

Advice should be sought from an appropriate volunteering adviser about how best to proceed.

Depending on the nature of the complaint, stage one of the complaints procedure may need to be combined with stage one of a problem-solving procedure (previously called BAA), so that the investigation of the complaint is not duplicated by a separate or subsequent

investigation into the actions of the volunteer who was the subject of the complaint.

Any review of this decision called for by either volunteer would be treated under the appropriate procedure:

- the complaints procedure if the complainant disagrees with the outcome.
- the problem-solving procedure if the volunteer who had been the subject of the complaint wishes to challenge the decision.

The next step would be a final stage review, no matter which party has called for it. That is, a stage two review under the complaints procedure cannot be invoked by a complainant who wishes to challenge the outcome of a stage two review under the problem-solving procedure.

It may alternatively be felt that, even if the complaint is felt to be legitimate, it would more appropriate to take a less formal approach with the subject of the complaint - e.g. conflict resolution so that an issue can be acknowledged, apologised for and a mutual resolution achieved. This would still be regarded and recorded as an informal problem-solving intervention.

### **Counter-complaints raised during a problem-solving process**

The problem-solving procedure includes a suggested joint process to be followed if a volunteer raises a complaint in relation to a problem-solving process that they are the subject of.

#### **Stage two: review**

Volunteers wishing to request a review should do so within 10 working days of the initial decision. As before, where possible this should be in writing, but the reviewer can take the request verbally, writing down the grounds for the review and confirming with the volunteer.

The reviewer will decide if it is reasonable to re-examine the complaint based on the information given by the volunteer. There must be adequate grounds for this, as set out in Appendix 1.

The reviewer must ensure that the GDI complaints log is updated to reflect the review. As with stage one, they must maintain a full record of the review, including timelines, notes of meetings, actions and communications.

The reviewer must acknowledge receipt of the request within 5 working days. Reviewers will consider the previous decision in light of the volunteer's objections, alongside any new information that has been raised.

This will usually involve a meeting with the volunteer, online or in person. They can choose to be accompanied by a volunteer, friend, or member of staff, under the same conditions as set out above.

The reviewer will conclude their investigation within 15 working days of receiving the request for a review, or, where this is not possible (e.g. they wish to speak to someone involved who is on annual leave), must give a new deadline, which should be as soon as is reasonably practical.

The reviewer should provide a summary of the investigation and their decision on the complaint in the volunteer's preferred format including, if relevant details of the stage three final review. This must include information on how to contact the Head of Volunteering.

### **Stage three: final review**

If the volunteer is still not satisfied with the outcome of the stage two review, they have the opportunity for a final review of the process. This must be based on either a clear breach of this procedure, or new information that is significant and relevant to the complaint. They must contact the Head of Volunteering within 5 working days of the review decision.

Please note this will not involve a re-investigation of the original complaint but will instead consider the actions and findings of the earlier stages. This will be based on the records kept of the earlier stages.

The Head of Volunteering should acknowledge receipt of the request for a review within 5 working days.

They will consider:

- Whether the procedure and process has been adequately followed
- Whether all information open to the investigators was properly considered
- Whether decisions taken appear fair and balanced based on the available information (in addition to overall findings this may also include whether the organisation's response was adequate in addressing the concerns raised)
- Whether additional information is sufficient to overturn earlier decisions
- Whether the complainant was disadvantaged in some way during the process (e.g., there was a failure to make reasonable adjustments to ensure their full participation)

At their sole discretion the Head of Volunteering may liaise with an appropriate Senior Manager to support objective decision-making. The Senior Manager must be from a department that is not involved in the complaint.

The outcome of the review will be communicated to the volunteer in their preferred format within 10 working days of Guide Dogs' receiving the request for Final Review. If it is not possible to respond within the specified time, the volunteer should be given an explanation of the delay and told when a response can be expected. The decision taken at this stage will be final.

If this review finds that there have been unacceptable flaws in the process, the Head of Volunteering should pass the complaint on for a re-review at a stage two level. This must be carried out by a new reviewer.

The reviewer must consider the complaint in the light of the Head of Volunteering's findings. Stage two timelines will be followed. The reviewer's findings will be final, and the volunteer cannot take the decision back to the Head of Volunteering to repeat the final review stage.

## **Staff absences**

The complaints team will take the availability of staff into account when arranging an investigating manager or a reviewer. In the event of



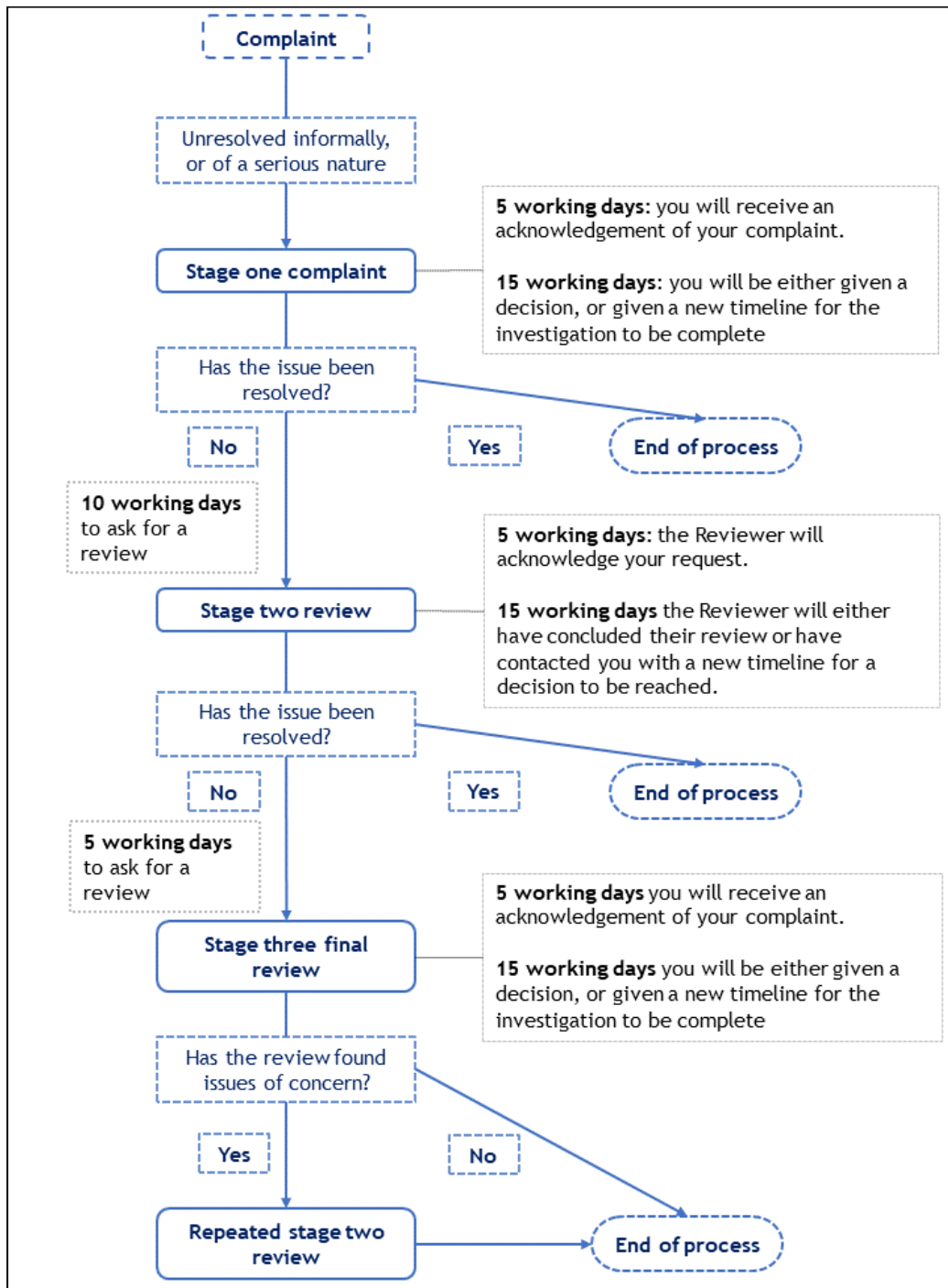
unplanned absence during an investigation or review the complaints team will liaise with the volunteer to decide on an appropriate action. This may mean waiting for the staff member to return or appointing a new investigating manager or reviewer.

For a final stage review, if the Head of Volunteering is on leave or otherwise unavailable, a member of the Volunteer Leadership Team will respond to the complaint. On agreement with the volunteer and complaints team, they may take on the complaint, pass to another appropriate manager, or wait for the Head of Volunteering to return.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Volunteer complaints procedure stages and timelines

The graphic below presents a flowchart of the stages and timeline of the volunteer complaints procedure. A text alternative follows the graphic.



## Text alternative to procedure stages and timelines flowchart

Below is a summary of the stages that the procedure follows with timelines for actions:

### 1. Informal complaint

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

### 2. Stage one complaint

**Within 5 working days** of making your complaint you will receive an acknowledgement of your complaint. This will include an invitation to meet.

**Within 15 working days** of making your complaint you will be either given a decision, or given a new timeline for the investigation to be complete.

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

### 3. 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.

#### 4. 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 complaint 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 complaint, the complaint 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:**

Complaints must be logged with the Complaints Team via '[Log a complaint](#)' on Pawtal. The resulting complaint file on the complaints system must be updated as appropriate.

[Volunteer Management Guidance - Complaints Procedure for Staff](#)

[Volunteer Guidance - Complaints Procedure](#)

#### **Permissible exceptions:**

All exceptions to this procedure must be agreed by the Volunteering Good Practice Specialist, Volunteering Good Practice and Relationships Lead or Head of Volunteering.

There may be rare occasions where a complaint is rejected without being fully investigated. This will usually only happen where a complaint is felt to clearly lack a sound basis, either because of the nature of the complaint or accompanying evidence, or where it is

believed the complaint has not been made in good faith - most public bodies take a similar approach to 'vexatious complaints'.

We reserve the right to do this because as a charity we do need to make appropriate use of our resources, including staff time.

Another potential exception would be where the complaint is about something outside our control - e.g. a change to how we work due to a change in law.

**Related Policies or Processes:**

- Volunteer Management Procedure - Problem-Solving
- Complaints Policy

## Governance Information.

### Governance Review & Approval Table:

The table below contains two rows and five columns.

<b>Governance Area:</b>	H&S	Protection of Children & Adults	Insurance	Legal	GDPR
<b>Date Approved:</b>					

### Review Frequency:

Process: Subject specific - Every 2 years

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. (Only the original approval date and the most recent amendment should be included in the table.)

Date	Version	Status	Details of Change
Jan 25	5.2	Updated	Updated job titles and responsibilities Clearer statement on preferred formats for communication Minor amendments to align with the new Volunteer Problem-Solving Procedure
May 23	5.0	Approved	New completely revised version following review

**End of document**