



Volunteer Guidance: Complaints Procedure

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Purpose of Best Practice Guidance

This guidance accompanies our volunteer complaints procedure. We have written it to give volunteers more information about what to expect if they make a complaint.

In general volunteers don't have additional rights or protections beyond those we all share as citizens. This means that some of the protections open to paid workers are not open to volunteers (paid workers have a specific legal status).

As a result, there are no legal obligations on Guide Dogs to investigate complaints raised by volunteers. However, given the importance we place on volunteering, we recognise that without a legal duty we still have a moral duty towards our volunteers to ensure that we are treating them fairly and reasonably, and therefore offer a process for dealing with complaints from volunteers. This also allows us to capture issues - without knowing where we might be going wrong, we cannot change things for the better.

Definitions:

Investigating Manager - staff member handling a stage one complaint.

Reviewer - staff member handling a stage two review.

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.

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

Resolving issues informally

We have a formal complaints procedure in place so that we can treat issues raised by volunteers fairly and transparently. However, we hope that many concerns can be resolved informally, through a conversation.

You should feel comfortable with raising questions or concerns with your volunteer manager or other appropriate members of staff. We would rather that you raised a small issue that has made you feel uncomfortable, upset, or undervalued than keep it to yourself, for several reasons:

- we don't want volunteers to feel this way
- we believe that giving volunteers a good experience benefits us and our service-users too - committed volunteers are an unstoppable force.
- if something has felt wrong to you, we need to know to avoid repeating it or affecting other volunteers in the same way
- it's easier for both us and you if we can resolve something while it is a small concern - when problems escalate they are much harder to deal with for everyone involved.

Tell your volunteer manager what happened, and how it affected you. They will do their best to resolve the problem.

One thing to be aware of is that it is possible that the staff member you have raised it with may feel that the concern needs to be handled through the complaints procedure. Reasons for this could include:

- They consider the complaint to be serious in nature
- They believe the issue needs to be recorded and properly addressed (e.g. it concerns another area of Guide Dogs)
- They feel that the issue needs a proper investigation (e.g. there was an incident with differing accounts of what happened)
- They feel that it is important that the issue is dealt with in a fair and transparent manner

Similarly, if the issue concerns a topic such as safeguarding, health and safety, data protection, or equality issues, our other policies take precedence, and we must take action where they may have been breached.

When to use the formal complaints procedure

While we hope that most problems can be resolved informally, this may not always be the case, and this is why the formal procedure exists.

You should use the procedure if:

- Your complaint is serious in nature, and you don't think an informal chat is appropriate
- You feel the issue must be logged and formally addressed, or
- An informal discussion did not resolve the issue

Stage one complaint

Raising a complaint

This should be put in writing. This means that there is a clear and unambiguous record of your initial complaint. Where this is not practical you can make your complaint verbally. When doing so please be explicit that you are making a formal rather than raising an informal concern. Your volunteer manager should make a note of your complaint and read it back to you. Make sure that you are happy with this summary.

When preparing to make the complaint, think about the 'what, why, where, and who' questions. You do not have to go into great detail, but the nature of your complaint should be clear - what happened? Why was it wrong? What was the impact of it on you or others?

Complaints are passed to our internal complaints team - they ensure that a file is opened for the complaint, and ask a relevant member of staff to act as an 'investigating manager'. This would usually be your volunteer manager, but if they are implicated in some way in the complaint, an alternative member of staff will be nominated.

Initial meeting

You will be invited to a meeting once the complaint has been recorded. You can choose to decline this if you and the person investigating agree that enough information has already been gathered. For example, you have complained about the contents of an email, and your initial complaint letter explained exactly why you were unhappy about it. Do remember though that the person investigating may still wish to speak to you - to introduce themselves if they are not already known to you, and to talk through the rest of the process.

The meeting may be face to face or online - you should discuss what is most appropriate and practical with the investigating manager.

You can be accompanied at the meeting by a volunteer, friend, or member of staff. It's important that they are aware that they are not there to speak for you. They are there to provide you with emotional support and can check that you have said everything you wanted to say, but they are not advocates.

We will however reconsider this if there are reasons why allowing someone to speak for you if this will ensure your viewpoint can be properly expressed - for example, where the nature of the incident has been very distressing, or you have a form of anxiety that might prevent you from being able to fully participate.

Complaint outcome

The investigating staff member will try to reach a decision within 15 working days of us receiving your complaint. This isn't always possible - they may need to speak to a witness or consult with someone who is on leave for example. They should however contact you and let you know when they believe they will be able to conclude their investigation.

Once a decision has been reached, the person investigating will arrange a meeting with you to tell you what they have decided. This is likely to be online. You can again be accompanied at this meeting.

The decision will be sent to you in writing after the meeting so there is a full record of the outcome.

We cannot always say what will be done as a result of your complaint being upheld. For example, where this would breach another person's confidentiality. We will take your wishes into account when it comes to actions following an upheld complaint, but at the same time, our response must be proportionate (e.g. an honest mistake by another volunteer that caused you upset might lead to additional support or retraining for them, but we would not ask them to leave unless what they did was seriously negligent), and within what we can reasonably control (e.g. we can ask, but cannot compel a third party to apologise).

If you do not agree with the outcome, you may be able to ask for a review. Please note that this is not an automatic process - you will have to show that there are reasonable grounds for the decision to be reviewed.

The review is undertaken by a more senior member of staff - the person investigating the complaint should tell you who this would be and how to contact them.

Stage two review

As with the initial complaint, you should put your request for a review in writing where this is practical.

We cannot simply review a decision because you disagree with it. As a charity we do need to be conscious of our resources, which includes staff time. Therefore you will need to say why you believe the initial outcome was wrong. The full procedure sets out some broad grounds for this:

- the process was flawed - for example, the investigating manager was implicated in the complaint
- the process was incorrectly followed - for example, you weren't able to fully express your concerns during your meeting as you weren't allowed to be accompanied during your meeting
- the process failed to take into account relevant information - for example, the findings seem to ignore accounts from witnesses
- new information has come to light that could impact on the decision - for example, corroborating evidence from another volunteer or member of staff.

These are not necessarily the only justifications for a review, but you will need to give a clear explanation of why it's reasonable to believe the decision was flawed when contacting the reviewer.

The reviewer will not fully reinvestigate the complaint. They will be considering what evidence the initial investigator considered, whether anything was ignored, missed, or misinterpreted, and whether fair conclusions were drawn from it. However they may decide to speak to people who were involved if they feel this is warranted, and if new information has been presented they will look into that and see whether that justifies a change in the outcome.

The reviewer will in most cases arrange to meet you, either face to face or virtually, as agreed with you. As before you may choose to be accompanied at the meeting.

Stage three final review

This review is carried out by the Head of Volunteering. They may involve another Senior Manager to support the process, but they will be from a different department to anyone involved in the complaint.

As with the second stage review, we can only accept a request for a final stage review if there are clear reasons why the decisions made up until this point may have been incorrect. It is a safeguard, rather than an automatic step in the procedure.

You would need to show grounds for believing one of the following:

- the stage two review did not appear to address the concern raised about stage one
- new information raised at stage two did not appear to be taken into account as part of that review
- the stage two review breached aspects of the procedure

If the review finds that the process has been significantly flawed, the complaint will be considered again at stage two - a new reviewer will look at the issue, taking into account what was been found to have been wrong with the prior investigation, and addressing problems as appropriate (e.g. speaking to a key witness who was not spoken to earlier in the process). The reviewer's decision will be final.

Should the stage three final review find no significant problems with how the complaint had been dealt with, its decision will be final.

By significant flaws or problems we mean anything that could reasonably call the prior decisions and/or the fairness of the process into question. For example, you gave a valid reason why you would need the person accompanying you at a meeting to play an active role in putting your views across, but this was denied.

A minor breach such as a deadline not being met does not mean the decision was wrong, although we will acknowledge and apologise for such incidents.

Appendix one: Frequently asked questions

What happens if a complaint is raised while the Volunteer Problem-Solving Procedure is being followed regarding the same situation?

If an investigation under the problem-solving procedure (previously called BAA) is already in progress, involving the same issues and or people, the Volunteer Complaints Procedure may be combined with the next appropriate section of the problem-solving procedure at the investigating manager's discretion. This will enable the processes to run in a joined-up manner, rather than running separate meetings and investigations.

How long after an incident or issue can I make a complaint?

In general, complaints should be raised within 3 months of the event or issue in question. Complaints regarding events or situations which occurred more than 3 months previously will only be considered where there is a safeguarding concern, or where exceptional circumstances (e.g. illness) meant that the delay was reasonable.

What is the role of the volunteer, friend, or staff member that can accompany volunteers to meetings?

They are there to provide moral support to you. We know that such a meeting could feel overwhelming, or be emotionally difficult, which could prevent you from making all the points you wanted to.

The companion should not speak for you, although they can remind you of details relevant to the complaint, or general points you wanted to make.

We will consider allowing a more active role for companions where there are reasonable grounds for doing so - for example, where you were very distressed by the matter they are complaining about, or where the presence of an advocate would ensure that your voice is being heard (e.g. you have a learning disability, or severe social anxiety).

Appendix three contains guidance for anyone accompanying a volunteer to a meeting under the complaints or problem-solving procedures.

On what grounds can I ask for a review of a decision?

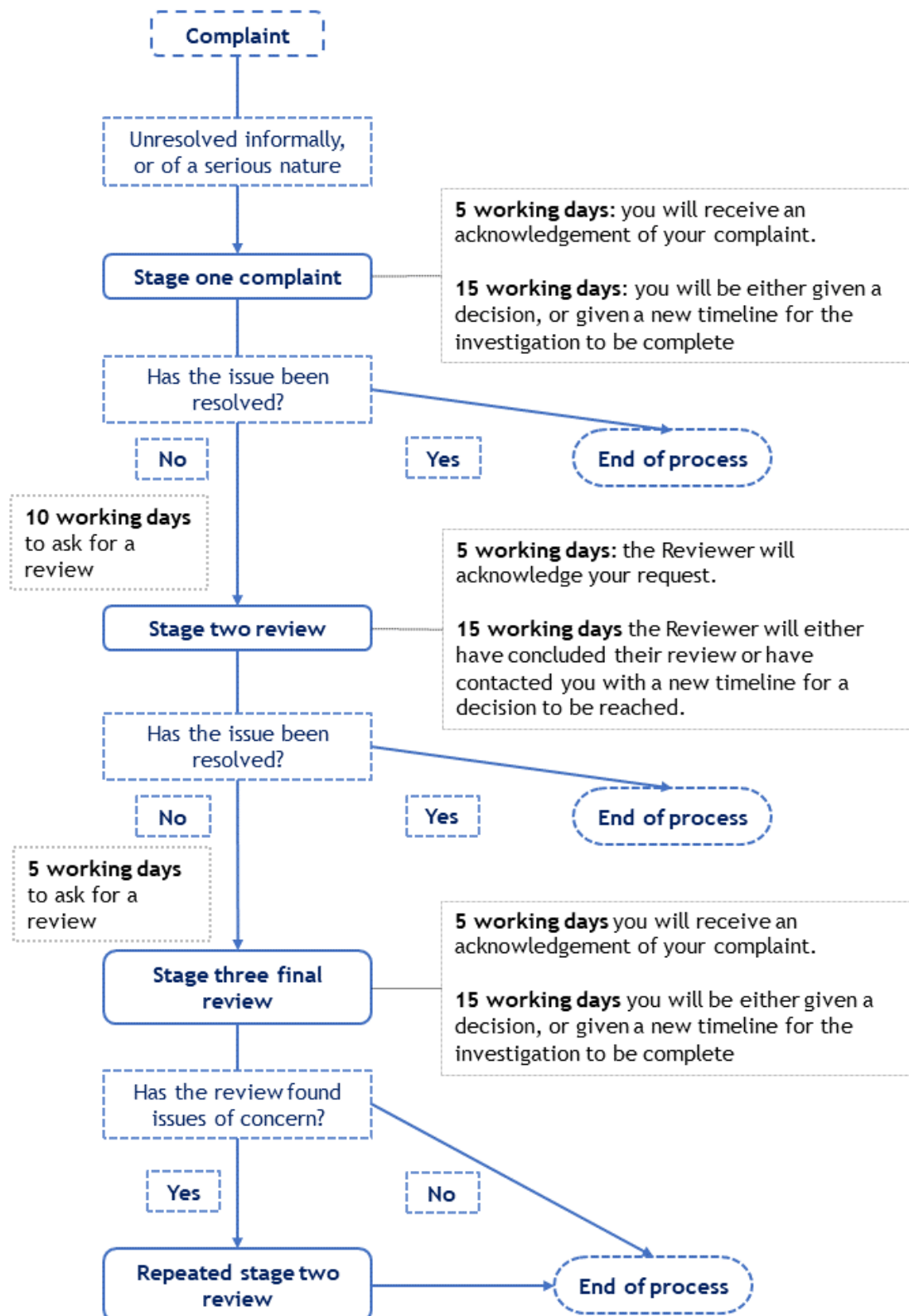
If you disagree with a decision and wish to ask for a stage two or three review, you must give tangible reasons why you feel the decision was incorrect. The following are examples of what these could be:

- the process was flawed - for example, the investigating manager was implicated in the complaint
- the process was incorrectly followed - for example, you weren't able to fully express your concerns during your meeting as you weren't allowed to be accompanied during your meeting

- the process failed to take into account relevant information - for example, the findings seem to ignore accounts from witnesses
- new information has come to light that could impact on the decision - for example, corroborating evidence from another volunteer or member of staff.

Appendix two: Stages and timelines

Flowchart of the stages and timeline. There is a text alternative following the graphic.



This 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.

Appendix Three - 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, 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 this has been 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.

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
10 Sep 2023	1.0	Approved	New guidance to support volunteers
29 Jan 2025	1.1	Updated	Information added on relation between complaints and problem-solving procedures, and role of companion at meetings.

End of document