

Volunteer Rights Inquiry

Recommendations and call to action

March 2011

Introduction

The Volunteer Rights Inquiry was set up in November 2009 following a number of high profile reports of serious breaches of trust between volunteers and the organisations they volunteered for. In the light of these, some volunteers began calling for an external means of complaints redress and defined volunteer rights.

Our aim was to begin to understand the nature and scope of the problems experienced by volunteers and to identify suitable remedies. We presented our initial findings in an interim report,* released in the summer of 2010. Following further consultation and feedback from the interim report, we have formulated this call to action.

The volunteering environment

In developing its conclusions, recommendations and call to action, the Inquiry carefully considered the environment of volunteering. Specifically, we noted that:

- Volunteering is not limited to the voluntary and community sector but takes place in public bodies, such as schools, hospitals or courts of law, and in the private sector. Volunteering can also include campaigning for organisations, unions or political parties or for leisure and of course overseas
- The nature of volunteering is changing as illustrated by volunteering as a pathway to work or by volunteering in the delivery of commissioned services. This will inevitably lead to increased scrutiny of the relationship between volunteers and volunteer involving organisations both nationally and locally
- The European Year of Volunteering in 2011 and the London 2012 Olympic & Paralympic Games will increase the profile of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations.

Considering these factors, the Inquiry believes that action is timely given the increasingly high profile and increasing complexity of volunteering.

Legislation

The Inquiry also considered the role of legislation in safeguarding volunteer rights.

Despite many volunteers having failed in their attempts to invoke existing equality and employment legislation, several of the volunteer involving organisations and volunteers we spoke to had strong concerns about introducing additional regulation and/or legislation. It was felt that this may present more barriers to volunteering and prescribe universal action that is not proportionate to the needs of a diverse sector. Our interim report suggested the introduction of an independent Volunteer Complaints Commissioner. While the Inquiry acknowledges the support given for this concept, it also recognises that volunteer involving organisations should have the opportunity to improve and strengthen their standards before such a body is established.

* This report is available to download at www.volunteering.org.uk/3Rpromise

The Inquiry accepts the value of making independent mediation and arbitration available through any approach that promotes and respects the reciprocal relationships between volunteers and volunteer involving organisations. Members of the Inquiry support efforts to bolster such provision through existing infrastructure at both local and national level and partnerships between volunteer involving organisations.

Recommendations

The Inquiry acknowledges that most volunteering happens in an amicable relationship between volunteers and volunteer involving organisations; however, sometimes this relationship breaks down. Although it is not possible at the moment to be precise about how frequent and widespread unresolved breakdowns are, they are not isolated incidents and are reported regularly to organisations such as Volunteering England, the Charity Commission, the Andrea Adams Anti-Bullying Trust and Public Concern at Work.

The Inquiry proposes that efforts to improve conditions for volunteers should: be proportionate to need; respect the reciprocity of volunteering; and promote parity of esteem between paid and volunteer staff.

We recommend that potential conflict can be minimised or avoided with a few simple steps:

- **Prevention is better than cure.** Organisations need to ensure best practice in volunteer management to prevent breakdown as far as possible. This involves strong internal mechanisms for preventing and, when necessary, diffusing grievances quickly
- **Breakdowns can often be resolved simply.** This could involve just sitting down and talking through the problems, especially if organisations have effective processes in place. Leaving problems unresolved exposes the volunteer or the volunteer involving organisation to accusations and counter accusations
- **Seeking independent support.** When their relationship breaks down and an emerging conflict cannot be resolved, neither the volunteers nor the volunteer involving organisations currently have anywhere to turn to. However, independent mediation and arbitration and/or information and support may be obtained through various organisations such as Volunteer Centres and Citizens Advice Bureaux.

These recommendations reflect our belief that, wherever possible, the informal and voluntary nature of volunteering should be preserved and further red tape avoided. Although the Inquiry considered a wide range of additional options for redress, they are not being advocated at this stage.

Our call to action

- sign up to the 3R promise

Although we recognise the enormous efforts already made by organisations to improve the volunteering experience, we feel that our call to action will ensure ongoing improvement, as well as addressing some of the concerns we have uncovered.

We are asking all volunteer involving organisations to sign up to the '3R promise' proposed below in order to raise standards of volunteer management.

By signing up to the 3R promise, organisations are making a commitment to work towards meeting each of the criteria set out below.

3R promise

We will endeavour to get it **RIGHT** from the beginning

- Our organisation will follow guidance on good practice and ensure it has up to date policies and evidence this in appropriate reports
- Our organisation will ensure that concerns of volunteers are listened to and given due consideration.

We will offer means to achieve **RECONCILIATION** if things go wrong

- Our organisation recognises that sometimes things go wrong and makes sure that everyone in the organisation knows how to deal with it
- Our organisation will identify a trustee with responsibility for volunteering who will monitor volunteer complaints and encourage rapid resolution in emerging conflicts
- Our organisation will explore local mediation services when necessary.

We accept our **RESPONSIBILITY**

- Our organisation explains and accepts its responsibility for its volunteers and their well-being and respects their wish to always have a fair hearing if a conflict arises
- Our organisation will work with the Call to Action Progress Group to share lessons and improve standards
- Our organisation will report publicly on the implementation of its 3R promise.

Join us now or get more information at:

3Rpromise@volunteering.org.uk

A list of organisations that have already signed up can be found at:

www.volunteering.org.uk/3Rpromise

Current supporters

The following organisations have already shown their support for our recommendations by signing up to the 3R promise:

- Association of Volunteer Managers
- Cancer Research UK
- Citizens Advice, the membership organisation for Citizens Advice Bureaux
- PDSA
- RSPB
- Scope
- St John Ambulance
- Voluntary Arts
- VSO UK

Call to Action Progress Group

In addition to the call to action, the Inquiry recommends the formation of a Call to Action Progress Group (CAP). Volunteer involving organisations and others interested in the welfare of volunteers will, by joining this group, work together to design solutions and fail-safes to protect volunteer rights, and assist volunteer involving organisations to uphold those rights. All action taken should: be proportionate to the range of voluntary action; maintain the reciprocal nature of volunteering; and uphold parity of esteem between volunteers and paid staff.

Members of the Volunteer Rights Inquiry and volunteer involving organisations committed to signing up to the call to action will be invited to join the CAP. The group will run for a period of two years before it reports on progress.

Its role will involve:

- Finalising, refining and regularly reviewing the 3R promise to ensure buy-in from, as well as continued relevance and challenge to, the volunteering movement
- Co-ordinating and monitoring responses to the 'call to action'
- Identifying minimum standards required to deliver the 3R promise: a commitment of volunteer involving organisations to get it **right**, to offer **reconciliation** and to accept **responsibility**
- Reviewing complaints processes and sharing lessons
- Supporting efforts to clearly signpost volunteers to helpful information, both locally and nationally
- Exploring how to collect further evidence about the experiences of volunteers and volunteer involving organisations when conflict occurs
- Encourage the setting up of mediation, arbitration, and other possible appeal mechanisms.

Further details about the CAP Group can be found at:
www.volunteering.org.uk/3Rpromise

Members of the Volunteer Rights Inquiry

Chair of the Inquiry

Sukhvinder Kaur-Stubbs, Chair of Volunteering England

Members of the Inquiry

Caroline Aldiss, a lead campaigner for volunteer welfare

Jodi Berg, Independent Complaints Reviewer, Charity Commission

Judith Brodie, Global Funding and Brand Director, VSO

Julia Dennis, Volunteering Development Manager, Citizens Advice

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Rob Jackson, Jen Kirtley and Charlotte Wright, Volunteering England

Acknowledgement

The Volunteer Rights Inquiry is indebted to all those who submitted evidence and helped its work. We would like to thank them for making the time, for drawing on their expert knowledge and relevant experience and for approaching the discussion with such openness and frankness. We have learned a great deal from them and hope to have been able to represent their views and best interests by means of this document.

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