

# Advising Communities

## Volunteer Handbook



July 2018

## Contents Page

1. Welcome
2. What we do
3. Our vision and mission
4. Our people
5. Equal opportunities statement
6. Your rights and expectations
7. Health and safety
8. Enhanced disclosure and barring service (DBS)
9. Trial period
10. Induction
11. Role descriptions and agreements
12. Data Protection Policy
13. The time you spend with us and core hours
14. Dress code
15. Expenses
16. Supervision and support
17. Training and development
18. Group volunteer meetings
19. Copyright
20. Use of telephone
21. Use of Internet
22. Personal details
23. Gifts from service users
24. House style
25. Resolving problem procedure
26. Ending volunteering placement
27. FAQ
28. Appendices
  - A. Organisation structure chart
  - B. Code of conduct
  - C. Resolving problems
  - D. Gifts from service users

## 1. Welcome

Welcome to Advising Communities (AC) and thank you for choosing to volunteer with us. We hope you will find it an enjoyable and rewarding experience. This handbook tells you about the organisation and how volunteers fit in.

## 2. What we do

AC is a legal advice agency offering advice and support to the community. AC offers advice in Welfare Benefits, Debt, Housing, Consumer, Employment, Immigration and other generalist legal matters.

## 3. Our vision and mission

Our vision is a 'A society where people live without poverty and tackle social injustice'

Our mission is:

- To tackle poverty, social injustice, disadvantage and discrimination
- To ensure citizens understand and are enabled to exercise their legal rights and responsibilities
- To actively promote financial and social inclusion for all
- To educate and advise those in financial need

Our values are:

- Respecting the rights of individuals and enabling them to make informed choices for themselves
- Being positive and solution focused
- Providing high quality services
- Challenging discrimination in all forms
- Valuing diversity and difference
- Working collaboratively with other agencies
- Minimising our impact on the environment
- Respecting our working environment and understanding our impact on others
- Making a positive difference
- Proactively asking for and sharing information and knowledge
- Being committed and valuing each other

Our strategic objectives are:

- To ensure service users are at the heart of everything we do
- To provide an outstanding service
- To be a pioneer of social justice
- To strengthen our reputation
- To build a robust organisation to enable the fulfilment of our vision
- To promote staff wellbeing
- To have the space to deliver the services our service users need

#### **4. Our People**

The Board of Trustees is registered with the Charity Commission. They are elected annually and are the governing body of the organisation. The Board meets at least 5 times a year to discuss issues affecting the organisation. Just like you, the Trustees are volunteers. The Board of Trustees delegate strategic management to the CEO who runs the organisation on a day to day basis, currently the CEO is Helen Rice.

We are proud to claim that we are made up of approximately 30 paid staff which are highly professional and experienced in their field of work. (See appendix A for the organisation structure chart).

#### **5. Equal Opportunities Statement**

AC is committed to providing an accessible, sympathetic and non-discriminatory service to enable people to achieve their rights and entitlements.

To improve these rights and entitlements we aim to exercise an influence on social policy at both local & national level.

An integral part of this is a commitment to Equal Opportunities in both our working practices and provision of our services.

We have respect for all our users. We recognise the inequalities, which people suffer and resolve to take action to reduce them. We have a policy of actively challenging discriminatory remarks, acts or practices.

#### **6. Your rights and expectations**

It is important to note that AC is providing volunteering opportunities and not voluntary work. The legal distinction between volunteering and voluntary work can be quite complex. However, there are some key questions to consider when assessing whether an activity is voluntary work:

It is likely to be voluntary work if:

- there is an obligation on the individual to perform the work and in return an obligation on the organisation to provide it.
- The obligation does not have to be in writing.
- the individual is rewarded for that work, either through money or benefits in kind.
- An obligation to work or receipt of remuneration is likely to mean that the individual is working under a mutuality of obligation. Where there is mutuality of obligation, it is voluntary work.

However, as the legal distinction is not always clear, we recommend that those involved seek independent legal advice for their specific activity.

AC recognises your rights as volunteers to:

- Know what is expected of them, to be given a clear role description and induction
- Be free from discrimination and treated with respect by all AC staff, users and other volunteers
- Receive a copy of all relevant procedures
- Have a confidential personnel file, which contains your personal details, volunteer agreement and any other relevant information. All personal details are held for a period of six years and are disposed confidentially as legally required
- Be trained and receive professional and personal development opportunities relevant to the volunteer role
- Be reimbursed for out of pocket travel and lunch expenses

- Report concerns/problems through 1:1 supervisions
- Negotiate and update the volunteer agreement with the supervisor/volunteer manager
- Not have your time and work taken advantage of

AC expects volunteers to:

- Work in accordance with our code of conduct, see appendix B
- Work to the tasks outlined in their role description and agree time available
- Work within your role description at all times, i.e. you should not be giving advice (unless being trained to do so), this could lead to your immediate termination
- Comply with all policies and procedures as per this Handbook
- Treat all staff, service users and other volunteers with respect
- Maintain confidentiality of all documents or information to which they are exposed to while serving as a volunteer, whether this information involves a single member of the staff, service users or other members
- Carry out their duties in a way that contributes to AC's aims and objectives
- Perform their duties on a regular scheduled and punctual basis
- Inform their supervisor as far in advance as possible when expected to be absent
- Report any concerns/problems as soon as practicable
- Inform the supervisor if you are unable to continue your placement and discuss reasons for ending the placement.
- Give at least two weeks' notice before ending your placement
- Complete an exit interview in order to share your experience and suggestions for improvement.
- Not exploit AC resources beyond reasonable use (e.g. phones, internet, stationery etc.)

Seeking legal advice:

- You will not be able to seek legal advice from any member of the AC staff team whether formally or informally. You may wish to use another advice provider if an issue arises.

## **7. Health and Safety**

Advising Communities is committed to ensuring that volunteers are not exposed to unnecessary risks while volunteering. Volunteers also have responsibility not to expose themselves and others to unnecessary risks. The organisation has a valid insurance policy covering all employees and volunteers on AC's duties as well as on its premises.

The organisation has a duty to provide and maintain healthy working conditions for all individuals in accordance with the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974. Information, training and supervision for this purpose will be provided. Volunteers must follow health and safety guidelines and any concerns or incidents must be reported in line with the procedures in the health and safety policy.

## **8. Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)**

All volunteers are subject to a DBS check before they can be accepted to volunteer with AC. This is in line with good practice and is done to ensure the safety of children and vulnerable adults. Please note, the DBS check may take some time to be processed. In accordance to our safer recruitment policy if the DBS indicates previous conviction(s) we will be required to carry out a risk assessment and according to legal requirements DBS checks may be repeated as required.

**Please note:** We carry out the check free of charge but if for any reason you are unable to start your placement with us or volunteer for less than a month we will request payment for carrying out the DBS check. The DBS check fee is anything from £11.00 - £15.00.

## **9. Induction period**

All new volunteers are subject to an agreed trial period of two/three weeks. At the end of this time, volunteers will be required to attend a meeting with their supervisor to discuss the induction period and sign for completion.

## **10. Induction**

All volunteers will be given an induction when they start their volunteering and will take part in a full induction programme. The induction will consist of:

- Welcome and staff introductions
- Accessing the building, fire exits, health & safety
- IT training (as required)
- Thorough discussion about the Volunteer Handbook and certain procedures
- Site visit to the 'centre' (as required)
- Inductee meeting with your supervisor to go through the induction plan
- Follow up meeting with the supervisor at the end of the induction period to discuss any problems, questions or concerns.

## **11. Volunteer Role Description and Volunteer Agreement**

Every volunteer will be given a role description, which describes the tasks and duties of their volunteering role. In addition to the duties set out in the role description, you may be asked to carry out such duties and exercise responsibilities, as AC may reasonably require.

All volunteers will be expected to sign a volunteer agreement. One copy will be returned to the volunteer and the other will be kept in the volunteer's personnel file.

## **12. Data Protection Policy**

Advising Communities is fundamentally committed to the privacy and confidentiality of personal and sensitive information. Personal details of staff, volunteers and service users are treated in the strictest of confidence. Information of a confidential nature should not be disclosed to anyone outside AC, without prior permission and explicit consent of the individual concerned. All volunteers are required to read and work within our full GDPR compliant Data Protection Policy, and Privacy Statement by clicking [here](#). Volunteers will be asked to sign a written agreement before starting any form of volunteering activity.

## **13. Volunteering time**

The starting and finishing time for different opportunities will vary. However, the hours will be agreed as per the volunteer agreement and we will ask you to commit to these.

If you are unable to attend at the agreed times, please let your supervisor know as soon as possible. If you know that you are going to be away for a longer period of time e.g. holiday or health problem, it would be very helpful if you could let us know beforehand so that we can arrange for your role to be covered.

Volunteers who work for 4 hours or more should take breaks when possible and as required.

## 14. Dress code

We do not have a strict dress code but we do consider our volunteers to be representatives of Advising Communities and therefore ask that you always look presentable.

## 15. Expenses

### a) Out of pocket expenses – definition and what you can claim

Advising Communities recognises that the reimbursement of expenses in the course of volunteering is important from an equal opportunities point of view. This is necessary to ensure that all individuals have access to volunteering opportunities.

The organisation's volunteers can claim reasonable **out of pocket expenses**, subject to the production of receipts as evidence of the expenditure.

Out of Pocket expenses means money that you spend on things such as food and travel as a result of volunteering at AC. Volunteers can re-claim the following:

- Travel expenses to AC from their home and vice versa
- Food expenses for a total of £5.00 per day if working more than 4 hours that day

Purchases for travel or food must be made on the day of volunteering or the previous day, any purchases made outside of these days will not be reimbursed.

### b) Claiming expenses

To make claims all receipts should clearly state the date the item was purchased, what the purchase was for and where it was purchased from, for example if an item is purchased from a local shop then all the above should be written on the receipt.

A volunteer must complete a 'volunteer expense form', attach the relevant receipts evidencing the journey travelled or food consumed/bought. The expenses form should be submitted to the Volunteer Manager for checking and approval on at least a monthly basis. Expenses will be paid directly into your bank account. Please allow up to 2 weeks for reimbursements.

## 16. Support and Supervision

AC is committed to providing effective support for its volunteers. All volunteers will have a dedicated supervisor. Support and supervision will be offered every 4-6 weeks. These should be in the form of a 1:1 meeting but depending on the role this may be done through regular phone or email contact.

## 17. Training and Development

As part of the placement for all our volunteers, it is compulsory to undertake online safeguard training. The training is very simple and will take you about 30-45 minutes to complete. It is very important that you complete this because it is vital that you are aware of the procedures to follow when working in the environment that you will be.

The development of training and support for volunteers is a high priority for the organisation in order to equip them with the necessary information and skills to carry out their tasks. It will be the responsibility of the designated supervisor/team manager(s) to see that this training is provided. It is the responsibility of the volunteer to attend relevant training. Training in the management of volunteers will be provided for those staff with direct responsibility for same.

## **18. Group Volunteer Meetings**

These will be held on a quarterly basis and arranged in advance for all volunteers to attend. At the meeting, the Volunteer Manager will share organisation wide developments and relevant changes.

## **19. Copyright**

Copyright on all materials a volunteer produce will be the property of AC.

## **20. Use of telephone**

The use of the telephone for outside calls is generally restricted to calls about AC business only. Permission should be sought first for personal calls which may be made when absolutely necessary and should be kept to a minimum.

## **21. Use of the Internet**

During volunteering hours, the use of the Internet is strictly for work related purposes only e.g. searches, other organisations, maps or other relevant information. Checking of personal e-mails, social networking sites, job hunting, latest news, travel updates or weather should be approved by the supervisor and carried out on your breaks.

## **22. Personal details**

If a volunteer changes their name, address or telephone number they should immediately tell the Volunteer Manager.

AC holds personal information about every volunteer digitally. All volunteers have the right to see all the information held about them. AC will not supply personal information about volunteers to third parties without the permission of the volunteer concerned.

## **23. Gifts from service users**

From time to time service users will wish to express their gratitude for the service they have received from AC by offering a gift to you for or to AC as an organisation. To tackle this there is a gift from service user's policy which can be referred to in appendix D.

## **24. House style**

When producing documents for a project or organisation wide advertising etc. the house style font is Arial. The font size should be 12.

If you are writing letters for service users, these would normally be on behalf of the service user and not Advising Communities (therefore should not be printed on letterhead) – however, always check this with your supervisor first.

All documents should be thoroughly checked for accuracy and spell checked and if required proofread before being sent out.

## **25. Resolving problems procedures**

While the involvement of volunteers is usually a positive experience for everyone involved, sometimes things can go wrong. You may wish to share a concern about your role, a member of staff or another volunteer or we may need to raise a concern. In either case, please refer to the 'Resolving Problems Procedure' (appendix C) for guidance.

## 26. Ending Volunteering Placement

We require volunteers who wish to end their agreement to give at least two weeks' notice.

If AC will be ending your placement we will give you one week's notice unless we have exhausted the resolving problems procedure (appendix C) then the placement can be terminated with immediate effect.

After your time with us we will ask you to undertake a feedback process via a survey because we are continuously aiming to improve our volunteer programme. Volunteer's feedback enables us to identify areas needing improvement and/ or where there is good practice.

## 27. FAQ

### **Why do AC use volunteers and not pay people for these roles?**

We offer volunteer opportunities to help the community get back into working environments, gain experience and increase confidence.

Volunteers help organisations like us to enhance the level of quality and services we provide by volunteering in the roles that we wouldn't be able to financially afford especially because these roles are very rarely full or even part-time positions.

### **What are the differences between volunteering and a paid job?**

#### **Differences**

- Volunteers are not paid a salary
- It's more flexible and 'tailor made'
- It's easier to say no!
- You don't have a binding contract

#### **Similarities**

- You have to go through an application process
- You may have to attend an interview
- You must stick to a role description
- You are assigned a supervisor/line manager
- You have the same working environment
- You must work within an organisations' policies and procedures
- You are a representative of that organisation
- You may need relevant training
- Your expenses are reimbursed but need approving first

### **I am currently receiving benefits, will volunteering affect my claim?**

In general, volunteering should not affect individuals claiming benefits. It is always good practice to inform DWP/ JCP that you are volunteering.

For JSA you must usually satisfy that you are available for work, actively seeking work and have a JSA agreement with DWP.

Volunteering should not affect your claim so long as you show that you are willing and able to take up work as an employed person immediately. If you are doing volunteering, you must be willing and able to attend an interview in connection with opportunities to and be able to volunteer on 48 hours notice and you need to be available on a weeks' notice. The same rules apply for JSA claimants under Universal Credit (UC).

**I am in receipt of Employment Support Allowance (ESA) Incapacity Benefit (IB) or Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA), will volunteering affect my claim?**

If you get ESA or IB or SDA you are allowed to volunteer for anyone other than a close relative. You must not be paid for your work, other than expenses such as travel, meals etc. There is no limit on the number of hours you can volunteer.

**Will my expenses affect my benefit payments?**

Any payment to cover your expenses if you are a volunteer, such income from expenses should be ignored and should not affect your payments.

**Can I count my volunteering hours as time spent searching for work for UC?**

If you are volunteering the number of hours that you must spend searching for work can also be reduced if your work coach accepts volunteering increases your chances of seeking paid work, you can only use up to half of the number of hours you are expected to spend searching for work if you are volunteering. For example, if you are volunteering for 35 hours per week and you are required to be seeking work for 35 hours per week, this requirement may be reduced to 17.5 hours.

**If I volunteer here for long enough will I get a job?**

The simple answer is we cannot guarantee this! But we are very proud to say that we have employed volunteers into paid roles in the past and hope to in the future.

Volunteering does not automatically lead to any paid employment. However, if any paid roles do become available you will be encouraged and are very welcome to apply. Often the experience that you gain from your time as a volunteer here can put you above other candidates, but unfortunately, we cannot just give you a job!

If you are looking for a job please mention it to your supervisor, often we share jobs adverts that are sent to us that you may be able to apply for. We may also be able to point you in the right direction for places that will help you with your CV or applications. We can also ensure where possible you have a range of experiences that will support your efforts towards employment.

**Can I get a reference from you?**

Yes, as a volunteer you can get a reference; volunteers are required to have done three months of volunteering or have volunteered full time for at least one month.

Please always let us know if we are going to expect a reference request from an external agency.

We are happy to provide a character reference should you need one. A character reference, also known as a personal reference, is a recommendation provided by someone who knows you and can attest to your character and abilities. This type of recommendation showcases your personality and people skills.

**Can I do more if I want to? And what happens if my role changes?**

If you ever want to try something different or want to extend your role, please talk to your supervisor to see if it is possible. You should try to work within your role description wherever possible and until changes are agreed you should not start carrying out other duties.

**What happens if I'm ill?**

Don't worry if you're ill, **please** let your supervisor know as soon as possible that you cannot attend and if you will be away for a longer period.

**What happens if I need to have some time off?**

If you need to miss some weeks because of exams, holidays or because of a change in your personal situation please let us know. We ask that you give us as much notice as possible so we can make other arrangements to fill your role in the interim.

**Will I meet other volunteers and employees?**

Yes, most roles require more than one volunteer and so there will be always be other volunteers also doing the same role. You will most certainly meet other employees of AC because you will be working alongside them.

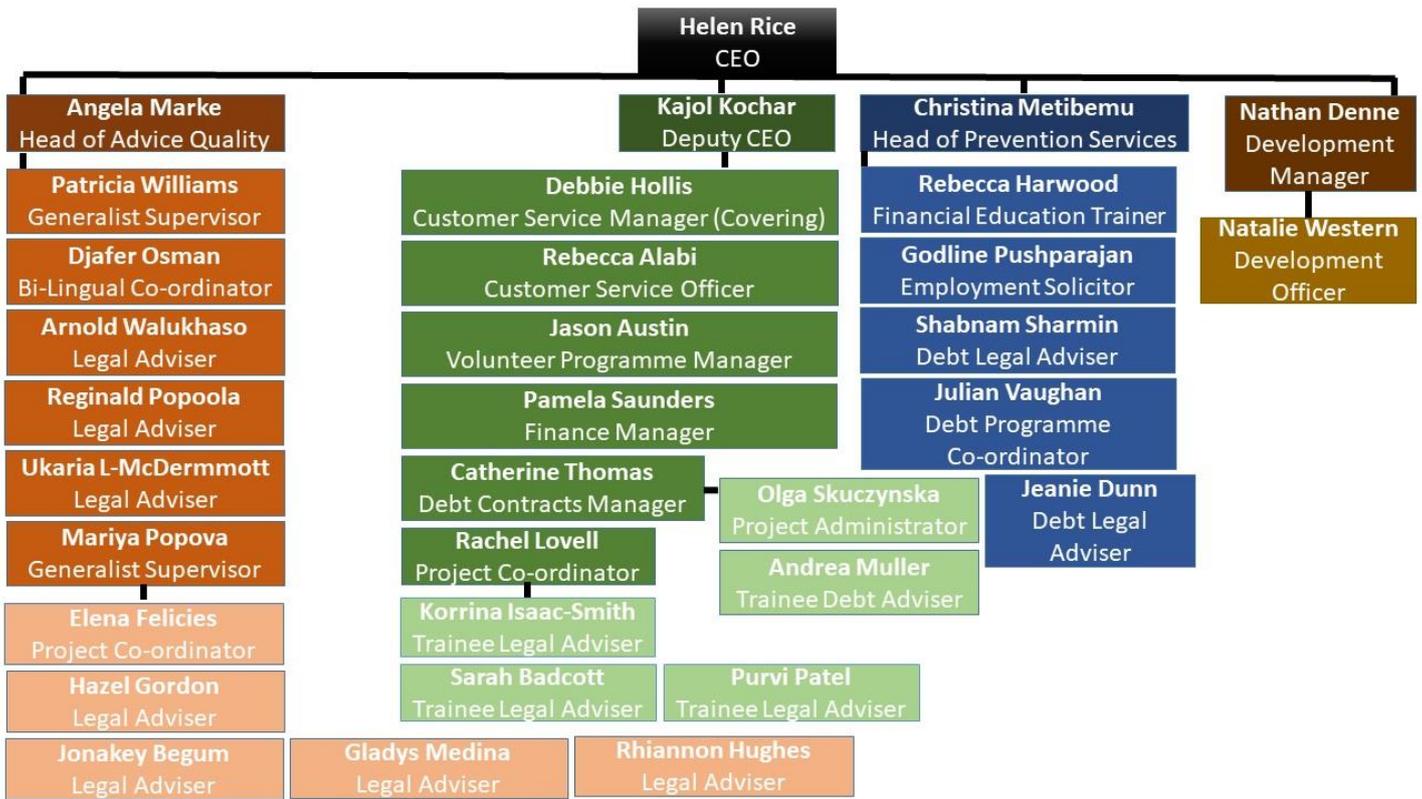
**Will there be any social events?**

Yes, we try to have at least one dedicated event for volunteers per year, normally in the summer. The team regularly go for social drinks/events or training and volunteers are always welcome.

**How old do I need to be before I can start volunteering?**

You can start volunteering from the age of 16.

**Appendix A - Organisation structure chart**



1

## Appendix B – Code of conduct and Values

### Code of Conduct

Volunteers are expected to conduct themselves professionally at all times and to show respect and courtesy to colleagues, service users and those from other organisations. The following general rules apply within AC:

- Volunteers are expected to dress presentably at all times, especially when with service users or externally.
- Always be on time
- You should be non-judgemental at all times
- Always respect people's personal property and space
- Leave the area where you work tidy so the next person can work comfortably
- Mobile phones should not be used when working with service users
- You are expected to keep personal phone calls to the minimum wherever possible
- You are not allowed to gamble, bet or run sweepstakes etc at work unless you have prior permission
- You should not undertake the unauthorised sale of goods that belong to the organisation
- You should never borrow from or loan money to service users
- You should never buy or sell anything to service users
- You must not advertise, promote or operate your own business during the hours of your volunteer placement
- You must not offer your own services to service users during your time volunteering at AC. We expect you to respect our service user's association to the organisation.
- You must not make collections on the premises without prior permission
- If there are any personal or work problems, feel comfortable to share these with your supervisor
- If you have brought in or consumed any intoxicating liquor (without prior approval), illegal drugs or substances on AC's premises, your volunteering agreement will be terminated and you will be asked to leave
- We welcome people of all or no faith. We respect the right of our staff and volunteers to hold personal views, including political opinions and affiliations. However, it is not appropriate for staff or volunteers to promote political or religious views during their work with us. We would take particularly seriously the promotion, display or distribution of ideas or material that contradicts our equal opportunities and diversity statement
- Be willing to lend a hand if required, we work together as a team

## Values of an advice setting

When supporting our service users, the following values apply within AC:

- Never give advice to service users (unless you are undergoing an Internal Advice Training Programme at AC).
- Always be patient and try to see things from service user's perspective
- Service users should be treated with respect at all times and likewise they should treat us with respect also
- Service users need to know that we will not tolerate discrimination of any kind i.e.; negative comments or actions against anyone's age, race, sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, disability and religious belief. Service users that persist will not be seen. Likewise, we expect our staff and volunteers to adhere to this
- Be consistent. It is important that all service users receive a fair service from whomever is supporting them, or whatever time of day that they see you.
- Nobody should take matters into their own hands, especially with regards to service user/advisor boundaries (such as confrontations or seeing service users outside of services etc.)
- You should not disclose the identity of any service user to any third party who is not subject to AC's data protection policy except in accordance with the said policy. This includes information about why they have been at AC for advice or the subject matter of the service user's visit. One also must be mindful about leaving messages on voicemails that are accessible to others.
- Try to encourage and empower service users that are capable to resolve issues themselves.
- Don't be bullied into doing things for service users that are not necessary and are a waste of time, but likewise be willing to do what is needed for service users. It is important that we all offer the same service; no service user should get special treatment and avoid accumulating service users that always ask for you on services and expect you to do extra for them, or are encouraged to distrust the service they may receive from another person.
- Ensure you seek clarification from the appropriate person that may be more experienced than yourself if you are unsure about any form support you are providing.

## **Appendix C – Resolving problems**

The relationship between the organisation and its volunteers is entirely voluntary and does not imply any contract. However, it is important that the organisation is able to maintain its agreed standards of service to the service users who use it, and it is also important that volunteers should enjoy making their contribution to the service.

### **Resolving your concerns**

If a volunteer is dissatisfied with any aspect of their placement they should:

- Initially explain their dissatisfaction to their supervisor in the form of a 1:1
- If that does not resolve the concern then a meeting with the volunteer manager should be convened
- If that does not resolve the issue then a formal meeting with the Deputy Chief Executive should follow
- If after this, we are unable to resolve the concern with a mutual agreement the placement will discontinue

At all times, the volunteer will be able to freely state their concerns and to have a friend/family member to accompany them in any meetings. If at any time the reputation of AC is put at risk by the activities or the behaviour of the volunteer AC can put an end to the agreement with immediate effect and this decision will be taken by the team manager.

If the volunteer is not satisfied with this decision they may request a meeting with the Deputy CEO who will hear their concerns and make a decision within five days. If after speaking with the Deputy CEO the volunteer is not satisfied with this decision they may appeal to the CEO who will hear their concerns and make a decision within ten days.

### **Resolving our concerns**

If a volunteer does not meet with the organisation's standards the following procedure will apply:

- Their supervisor will meet with you to express any concerns and an action plan will be developed to ensure that the standards are met
- If this does not resolve the concern then a meeting with the volunteer manager will be convened
- If standards are not met then the organisation will have the right to end the volunteer placement

## **Appendix D – Gifts from service users**

This policy is designed to protect staff/volunteers from allegations of favouritism or dishonesty from service users and to protect volunteers from abuse of trust.

1. Service users should always be made aware that the service is free and that volunteers are there to assist service users to claim their rights and entitlements.
2. If service users wish to offer something, volunteers should suggest a “thank you” note which would be useful to quote to funders or to use in our annual review.
3. For your own protection, you should always inform your supervisor if you accept a gift.
4. You should never accept money as a gift unless it is a donation to AC. In this case a receipt must be given to the individual. If money is sent or left for you, you should notify your supervisor who will write to the service user to ascertain whether the gift should be deemed to be a donation to Advising Communities. If this is not the case then it will be returned.
5. If a service user gives you an expensive or inappropriate gift or gives repeated gifts you should inform your supervisor immediately.