

Developing a Complaints Policy and Procedure

(Resource contributed by Simon Croft)

Why Have a Complaints Policy and Procedure?

An effective complaints management system is a proven way of maintaining and building relationships with the people on whom the charity depends.'

Handling complaints well:

- Demonstrates your commitment to your clients and other stakeholders
- Demonstrates your commitment to providing the best possible service
- Helps you to find out about things that have gone wrong so you can fix them
- Helps you to prevent things going wrong again in future

Who Is This Model For?

This model policy and procedure is intended for small organisations that have no staff, or only one or two non-managerial staff.

Adapting the Model to Suit Your Organisation

The policy assumes that complaints are likely to be handled by the board. If this is not the case – for example, if you have a senior volunteer who manages other volunteers and who is better placed to field initial complaints – you may wish to amend the policy accordingly.

It is also likely that in many cases small organisations will not have a permanent office, so you should consider carefully what address you give out for written complaints – for example, a PO Box rather than a personal address. You may also need to think about when and how people may make complaints in person.

Text [in purple and in square brackets] shows where you need to insert your organisation's name, or decide what approach to take for your organisation. However, any part of the policy can and should be modified if it doesn't suit your organisation, not just the purple text.

Whatever your organisation does, and however it works, flexibility in handling complaints is essential so try not to make your procedure too rigid.

IMPORTANT

Organisations are all different – what is suitable for one may not be suitable for another. It is therefore important that you think through carefully what you actually need to put in place in your particular organisation and how it will work in practice.

As with all model policy and procedure documents, the models given here should only be used as a starting point to develop a tailored version.

It is the responsibility of each individual organisation to ensure any policies and procedures adopted are both appropriate for its particular needs and compliant with all relevant prevailing legal requirements.

Complaints Policy of [Organisation name]

[Organisation name] views complaints as an opportunity to learn and improve for the future, as well as a chance to put things right for the person [or organisation] that has made the complaint.

Our policy is:

- To provide a fair complaints procedure which is clear and easy to use for anyone wishing to make a complaint
- To publicise the existence of our complaints procedure so that people know how to contact us to make a complaint
- To make sure everyone at [Organisation name] knows what to do if a complaint is received
- To make sure all complaints are investigated fairly and in a timely way
- To make sure that complaints are, wherever possible, resolved and that relationships are repaired
- To gather information which helps us to improve what we do

Definition of a Complaint

A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, about any aspect of [Organisation name].

Where Complaints Come From

Complaints may come from *[say who can complain under this procedure. You may wish to use a general statement e.g. any person or organisation who has a legitimate interest in [Organisation name], or you may wish to list only certain groups e.g. clients, members, donors, members of the local community].*

A complaint can be received verbally, by phone, by email or in writing.

[Include this line if you have staff: This policy does not cover complaints from staff, who should use [Organisation name]'s Discipline and Grievance policies.]

Confidentiality

All complaint information will be handled sensitively, telling only those who need to know and following any relevant data protection requirements.

Responsibility

Overall responsibility for this policy and its implementation lies with *[e.g. the board of trustees, the management committee]*

Review

This policy is reviewed regularly and updated as required.

Adopted on:.....[date]

Last reviewed:.....[date]

Complaints Procedure of [Organisation name]

Publicised Contact Details for Complaints:

Written complaints may be sent to [Organisation name] at [land address] or by e-mail at [e-mail address].

Verbal complaints may be made by phone to [phone number] or in person to any of [Organisation name]'s [staff], volunteers or trustees at [office address] or [at any of our events or activities].

Receiving Complaints

Complaints may arrive through channels publicised for that purpose or through any other contact details or opportunities the complainant may have.

Complaints received by telephone or in person need to be recorded.

The person who receives a phone or in person complaint should:

- Write down the facts of the complaint
- Take the complainant's name, address and telephone number
- Note down the relationship of the complainant to [Organisation name] (for example: client, member)
- Tell the complainant that we have a complaints procedure
- Tell the complainant what will happen next and how long it will take
- Where appropriate, ask the complainant to send a written account by post or by email so that the complaint is recorded in the complainant's own words.

For further guidelines about handling verbal complaints, see **Appendix 1**

Resolving Complaints

Stage One

In many cases, a complaint is best resolved by the person responsible for the issue being complained about. If the complaint has been received by that person, they may be able to resolve it swiftly and should do so if possible and appropriate.

Whether or not the complaint has been resolved, the complaint information should be passed to [*state who complaints should go to e.g. a nominated trustee*] within [*one week*].

On receiving the complaint, [*person who complaints go to*] records it in the complaints log. If it has not already been resolved, they delegate an appropriate person to investigate it and to take appropriate action.

If the complaint relates to a specific person, they should be informed and given a fair opportunity to respond.

Complaints should be acknowledged by the person handling the complaint within [*a week*]. The acknowledgement should say who is dealing with the complaint and when the person complaining can expect a reply. A copy of this complaints procedure should be attached.

Ideally complainants should receive a definitive reply within [*four weeks*]. If this is not possible because for example, an investigation has not been fully completed, a progress report should be sent with an indication of when a full reply will be given.

Whether the complaint is justified or not, the reply to the complainant should describe the action taken to investigate the complaint, the conclusions from the investigation, and any action taken as a result of the complaint.

Stage Two

If the complainant feels that the problem has not been satisfactorily resolved at Stage One, they can request that the complaint is reviewed at Board level. At this stage, the complaint will be passed to [*state who Stage Two complaints should go to e.g. the Chair*].

The request for Board level review should be acknowledged within [*a week*] of receiving it. The acknowledgement should say who will deal with the case and when the complainant can expect a reply.

[*The person who receives Stage Two complaints*] may investigate the facts of the case themselves or delegate a suitably senior person to do so. This may involve reviewing the paperwork of the case and speaking with the person who dealt with the complaint at Stage One.

If the complaint relates to a specific person, they should be informed and given a further opportunity to respond.

The person who dealt with the original complaint at Stage One should be kept informed of what is happening.

Ideally complainants should receive a definitive reply within [*four weeks*]. If this is not possible because for example, an investigation has not been fully completed, a progress report should be sent with an indication of when a full reply will be given.

Whether the complaint is upheld or not, the reply to the complainant should describe the action taken to investigate the complaint, the conclusions from the investigation, and any action taken as a result of the complaint.

The decision taken at this stage is final, unless the Board decides it is appropriate to seek external assistance with resolution. [*You may wish to name a particular avenue here such as a national body or other independent organisation*]

[*For organisations which are charities:*

External Stage

The complainant can complain to the Charity Commission at any stage.

Information about the kind of complaints the Commission can involve itself in can be found on their website at: www.charitycommission.gov.uk/publications/cc47.aspx

Variation of the Complaints Procedure

The Board may vary the procedure for good reason. This may be necessary to avoid a conflict of interest, for example, a complaint about the Chair should not also have the Chair as the person leading a Stage Two review.

Monitoring and Learning from Complaints

Complaints are reviewed annually to identify any trends which may indicate a need to take further action.

Appendix 1 - Practical Guidance for Handling Verbal Complaints

- Remain calm and respectful throughout the conversation
- Listen - allow the person to talk about the complaint in their own words. Sometimes a person just wants to "let off steam"
- Don't debate the facts in the first instance, especially if the person is angry
- Show an interest in what is being said
- Obtain details about the complaint before any personal details
- Ask for clarification wherever necessary
- Show that you have understood the complaint by reflecting back what you have noted down
- Acknowledge the person's feelings (even if you feel that they are being unreasonable) - you can do this without making a comment on the complaint itself or making any admission of fault on behalf of the organisation
e.g "I understand that this situation is frustrating for you"
- If you feel that an apology is deserved for something that was the responsibility of your organisation, then apologise
- Ask the person what they would like done to resolve the issue
- Be clear about what you can do, how long it will take and what it will involve.
- Don't promise things you can't deliver
- Give clear and valid reasons why requests cannot be met
- Make sure that the person understands what they have been told
- Wherever appropriate, inform the person about the available avenues of review or appeal