

Complaints Handling

Guidelines for Clubs

Please note Special Olympics Ireland has provided these guidelines to assist you in dealing with issues that may arise within your own club. These guidelines are not binding and are designed for use with a Complaints Policy & Handling Procedure. Any references to the process / timelines in these guidelines have been written in line with the Club Complaints Policy template available to your Club. Please be mindful that your Club may have made amendments to the template before adopting their Club's policy and ensure that Club Management Team members are familiar with the specifics of your own Club's policy.

If Special Olympics Ireland receives a complaint regarding a club, Special Olympics Ireland will confirm that all steps in the Club's Complaints Policy have been exhausted before examining any complaints. Where these steps have not been followed, Special Olympics Ireland will refer the complainant back to their club.

It is important that Clubs respond to all complaints received and follow their own Club's policy in doing so. If a Club Management Team is unsure, about what to do they can contact their Club Regional Development Officer who will provide advice only. Special Olympics Ireland staff cannot get involved in the management or resolution process of any complaints at a club level.

Top Tips

Practical Guidance for Dealing with a Complaint

- Act promptly to prevent issues escalating, Clubs should respond as quickly as possible to complaints.
- Do not dismiss an informal complaint. Agree to look into all reported issues.
- Declare immediately if there are any conflicts of interest or loyalty.
- Obtain details about the complaint before any personal details.
- Separate the person from the problem – stay neutral and act impartially.
- Acknowledge the person's feelings e.g. *I can see this is upsetting for you*. This is not making a comment on the complaint itself or making any admission of fault by the Club but acknowledging the person.
- It is important that all people be treated fairly. Clubs should endeavour to act in the best interests of all parties involved.
- Keep all parties informed. All parties need to know what is going to happen and when, who is involved, how long it is going to take and the possible outcomes.
- Stick to the facts - gossip, rumours, personal viewpoints and heated discussions can easily cloud a situation and make it difficult to gather facts.
- Do not make a judgement until you have heard both sides of the story.
- Ensure that no complaint made in good faith will have any negative impact on any individual.
- Clubs should not investigate any matter that is or has been subject of legal proceedings before a court or tribunal or any matter that could prejudice an investigation being undertaken by An Garda Síochána / Police Service of Northern Ireland.
- If complaints are alleging criminal activity, decide if it needs to be referred to An Garda Síochána / Police Service of Northern Ireland.
- Understand that the person complaining can contact an external authority at any stage in a complaints process. (*Note: If SOI receives a complaint regarding a club, SOI will confirm that all steps in the Club's Complaints Policy have been exhausted before examining any complaints*).
- Learn from the complaints and use them to improve.

General Communication Tips

- Listen – allow the person to talk about the complaint in his or her own words without interruption. Sometimes a person just wants to “let off steam”.
- Show an interest in what is being said.
- Be polite and professional.
- Avoid defensive or aggressive language and use age appropriate language.
- Remain calm and respectful throughout the conversation. It is important that people feel comfortable throughout the complaints handling process so that they can provide as much information as possible about the issue.
- Do not debate the facts especially if the person is angry let them speak.
- Ask for clarification or more details or examples wherever necessary.
- Show that you have understood the complaint by reflecting back what you have noted.

Confidentiality

Raising a complaint can often be difficult for the complainant. Confidentiality helps build a relationship of trust and confidence, and can encourage members to make the Club aware of complaints. Here are some practical measures a Club can put in place to protect confidentiality:

Correspondence

- Have a single point of contact. Club must appoint a Complaints Administrator who is a single point of contact with the Club.

- Emails should not be sent to generic email addresses where others may have access to the account.
- Restrict access to information to those people that need to know the confidential information i.e. only send information to or invite people to a meeting that are directly involved in dealing with the complaint.

Communication

- Discuss matters in a private place - make sure that others cannot hear your discussions.
- Ensure that any telephone discussions are private.
- Avoid having meetings at the Club's training facility as this can make people uncomfortable and allow someone to overhear something they should not. If you are meeting face to face, arrange a time when a private room is available at the Club or at a location away from the club.
- Obtain details about the complaint before any personal details.
- A complainant is permitted to bring an individual to a meeting with them; any issues raised should not be discussed with that individual at any time. Any correspondence should be directly with the complainant.
- To learn from the complaint and in delivering an outcome e.g. retraining / education information should only be given on a need to know basis to other individuals.

Storing information

- All information should be handled sensitively, following all relevant data protection requirements.
- Advise the complaints administrator / any person handling a complaint on issues of confidentiality, record keeping and data protection.
- Have a procedure in place for handing over any confidential information in the event of a change in Complaints Administrator.

Note: *Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed for example, there may be times where the Club must report the complaint to an external agency. Additionally the Club will inform any person named in a complaint of the complaint and allow the individual(s) the right to reply.*

Responding to a complaint

Responding to all complaints you receive, both informally and formally, is a great way to demonstrate that you take the experience of your current and future athletes, coaches and volunteers seriously.

Remember:

- To thank the complainant for bringing the issue to your attention - feedback is important to any club.
- To respond specifically to the issues brought up by the complainant.
- Where you can, to show the action you have taken to resolve an issue or to clear up a misunderstanding or misstatement. Just be mindful not to get into too much detail.
- Any timelines stated within your Club's policy for handling complaints. Where it is not possible to meet any stated timelines, inform the complainant and continue to do so until the matter is resolved.

Awareness

- Your complaints policy should be made accessible to all club members and made available on request to any other parties e.g. member of the public.
- All Club Management Team Members should also be provided with a copy of these guidelines or any other material to support their role in the complaints handling process.
- Any updates to the policy following reviews should be communicated to all members as soon as possible and updated on any public forums e.g. Club website.

Document Retention

- Keep accurate records.
- Retain records for a period determined by the Club keeping in line with legislation.

Possible Outcomes:

Formal / Informal Complaint

Whether the complaint is dealt with formally or informally, the resolution may result in one or more of the following outcomes:

- An apology where appropriate.
- A further explanation where miscommunication or a misunderstanding has occurred.
- Mediation between the complainant and respondent.
- Education or training for a person or group.
- New policies or a change in policies.
- New or changed practices or procedures.
- A review of a decision.
- A formal warning or other formal discipline, such as suspension or cessation of membership.

Any outcome or sanction should be proportionate in relation to the nature of the complaint.

Appeal

The possible outcomes of an appeal include:

- The panel members will uphold, vary or make a new finding and recommendation on the decision previously issued.
- If it is deemed that, the complaints procedure was not followed in line with the Club's policy and procedures, the Appeals Panel may request a new investigation into the complaint (this new investigation does not guarantee a change to the previous decision / outcome).

Other Resources

Some issues may not fall within the scope of the complaints policy. Other documents to assist in the running of your club include:

- Code of ethics – [click here to access the resources](#)
- Club Handbook – [click here to find the resource](#)
- Model Club Constitution Template
- Regulations Governing Special Olympics Ireland Sport - [Official Sports | Special Olympics Ireland](#)
- Special Olympics Ireland Guidance for Clubs concerning GDPR - [click here to access the resources](#)

Complaints Handling – Roles & Responsibilities



Club Management Team Member

- In addition to the duties and responsibilities outlined in the Club Handbook ([click here to find the resource](#)), here are some common duties for the Club Management Team when handling complaints:
- Ensuring that the club has a Complaints Policy & Handling Procedure in place, to help the club learn from any issues and strive to the best it can be.
- Knowing and been aware of the policies and procedures which are in place within the Club.
- Receiving complaints, treating them seriously and dealing with issues promptly and fairly in accordance with the Club's procedures.
- Ensure that the Complaints Policy & Handling Procedure is made accessible to all members and they are made aware of information that is relevant to them.
- Providing athletes, coaches, families and volunteers with relevant advice and feedback when required.
- Resolving any complaints that can be resolved at Step 1 of the procedure.
- Provide the Complaints Administrator with a record of the agreed outcome and details of the specific action taken to resolve the issue.
- Participate in the Complaints Handling procedure or Appeals Panel:
 - Represent the club at any meetings
 - Completing any agreed tasks/deadlines.
 - Participating in, contributing to and supporting the investigation of any complaint where requested.
- Declare any conflicts of interest as soon as you become aware of them.
- Liaising with the membership officer to ensure all volunteers have received appropriate training for their roles.
- Agree to abide by the confidentiality agreement within the Code of Conduct
- Ensure that records are maintained correctly and in line with data protection obligations.

Chairperson

The Chairperson will have specific responsibility for:

- Ensuring that the complaints policy and procedure is operating effectively.
- Assigning tasks to Club Management Team members when handling formal complaints or appeals and oversee the completion and conclusion of it.

- Delegating their role should a conflict of interest exist.
- Implementing any outcomes from the complaints process e.g. updating policies

Complaints Administrator

The club should identify a person by role or name who will receive complaints and take care of the correspondence and administration of the complaint. SOI would recommend that this role be taken on by the Secretary of the Club; however, the Club can choose the individual themselves. This must be an individual and cannot be a shared role.

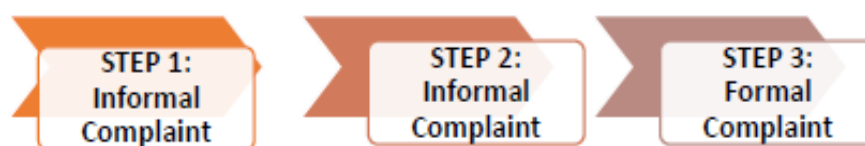
The Complaints Administrator will have specific responsibility for

- Receiving and acknowledging complaints within the timelines of the Club's policy.
- Informing the Chairperson of any complaints received formally.
- Being the single point of contact for correspondence to and from the complainant.
- Coordinating correspondence from all people involved in a complaint i.e. those investigating the complaint or the Appeals Panel.
- Responding to the complainant with any findings
- Monitoring the feedback from the Club Management Team regarding any informal complaints received. They will bring any important / recurring issues to the attention of the Club Management Team at any Club meetings.

Note: The Complaints Administrator does not have the responsibility for handling or investigating any complaints or appeals. The Complaints Administrator may have a dual role within the Club, which could involve handling or investigating any complaints or appeals.

Complaints Handling Process

INFORMAL COMPLAINT (Step 1 & 2)



Where possible the Club should aim to resolve issues informally at Step 1 or 2 in the procedure.

Who can deal with the complaint?

- Step 1: Many people within the Club e.g. Coach / Head Coach may be able to respond to straightforward or simple complaints, while a member of the Club Management Team may better address more specific or detailed complaints.
- Step 2: A member of the Club Management Team. The person receiving the complaint may consult with other members of the CMT.

How is the complaint received?

Informal complaints may be via a phone call, email or a face-to-face meeting.

How is the complaint handled?

When dealing with an informal complaint:

- Provide your own name, greet the person in a positive manner and ask how you can help.
- 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.

- Do not promise things you cannot deliver. If you cannot deliver on a request, give clear and valid reasons why requests cannot be met.
- Make sure that the person understands what they have been told.

Your steps to resolving the complaint informally can include:

- Providing additional information to the complainant.
- Providing an apology. If you feel that an apology is deserved for something that was the responsibility of your Club, then apologise.
- Informing the complainant who might be best to deal with the issue (e.g. a specific CMT Member).

Timelines

- Step 1: The complaint should try to be resolved at the first point of contact.
- Step 2: The club will strive to respond to informal complaints within 5 working days.

Next Steps:

- Step 1: If the complainant remains dissatisfied, they can contact the Complaint's Administrator about the complaint.
- Step 2: The club will strive to respond to informal complaints within 5 working days.

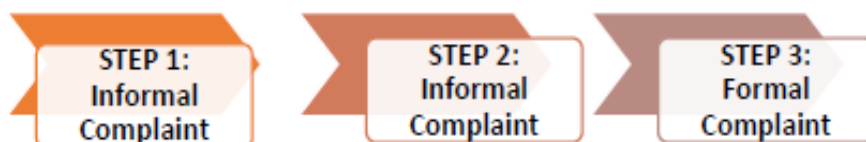
Recording a complaint

Where resolution is achieved, the person who dealt with the complaint will record:

- A summary of the complaint (what happened, when, where, who was involved and what the impact on the complainant was)
- A record of what has been agreed and the specific action taken to resolve the issue.

Documents will be retained for a period determined as per Special Olympics Ireland Guidance for Clubs concerning GDPR and relevant legislation.

FORMAL COMPLAINT (Step 3)



Who can deal with the complaint?

A member(s) of the Club Management Team will deal with any formal complaints received.

Note: not all members of the CMT need to be involved in dealing with each complaint. Two to three members will be sufficient. This will also ensure those other CMT members, not involved with the complaint; are available should the complaint lead to an appeal.

How is the complaint received?

Formal complaints must be submitted in writing and addressed to the Complaint's Administrator.

How is the complaint handled?

The Complaint's Administrator will acknowledge receipt of the complaint and will confirm whether the issue(s) raised in the complaint is/are within the Club's control.

The CMT member(s) will review:

- The complaints form (if received) and establish whether the complainant has any particular requirements (e.g. language difficulties).
- The outcomes sought by the complaint and if more than one issue is raised the CMT will determine if the issues need to be addressed separately.

The complainant will be informed who has been asked to investigate the complaint. The investigator is responsible for carrying out the formal investigation of the complaint but may draw on appropriate expertise, skills etc. as required. The extent of this investigation will depend on how complex and how serious the issues raised are.

The person who is investigating the concerns will aim first to establish the facts. When investigating the complaint, the investigator:

- Will look at relevant evidence including files, notes of conversations, letters, emails or anything else, which may be relevant to the complaint.
- Will talk to the any other party involved. Any party will be permitted to bring one other individual to any meetings with them.
- Will look at the Club's policies and any guidance.
- If the complaint relates to a specific person, they should be informed and given a further opportunity to respond.
- Will keep the person making the complaint up to date on progress, particularly if there are any delays.
- May ask to meet the complainant to discuss the complaint.
- Occasionally the investigator might suggest mediation or another method to try to resolve disputes.
- Will communicate the outcome of the complaint using the most appropriate medium.

Timelines

- The Complaint's Administrator will acknowledge receipt of the complaint within 7 working days.
- The team should aim to resolve the formal complaint within 30 working days. If this is not possible, an update should be provided by the Complaint's Administrator to the complainant every 30 working days.

Options:

Following consideration of the complaint and any investigation into the issues raised, the Complaint's Administrator will contact the person making the complaint and advise them of

- The outcome of the complaint and any action taken
- The reason/s for the decision
- The remedy or resolution/s proposed or put in place.

The Chairperson will ensure that outcome is properly implemented and monitored.

If the complainant remains dissatisfied, the Complaint's Administrator will advise them of the appeals process and specifically the grounds for an appeal.

Recording a complaint

The investigator will record the following:

- A summary of the complaint (what happened, when, where, who was involved and what the impact on the complainant was)
- Investigation log
- Timeline/chronology
- Notes
- Statements

- Notes of interviews
- Report

Documents will be retained for a period determined as per Special Olympics Ireland Guidance for Clubs concerning GDPR and relevant legislation.

APPEAL

Who can deal with an appeal?

Appeals will be received by the Complaints Administrator and passed onto the Appeals Panel.

Setting up an Appeals Panel

An Appeals Panel will consist of three members of the Club Management Team at any one time

- Chairperson
- Secretary
- Treasurer
- Sports Officer
- Membership Officer
- Club Safeguarding Officer

The CMT should decide annually which three members would be appointed as the Appeals Panel for the coming year. During the year, if a member of the Appeals Panel is absent or a conflict of interest arises another member of the above personnel may sit on the panel. Where the number of personnel might limit the capacity to appoint an independent appeals panel, the CMT may appoint club volunteers not on the CMT to the panel.

If a conflict of interest arises between any of the above and the nature of the complaint, the Club may avail of the services of an external party to review the appeal. When using an external party to determine if an appeal is warranted the Complaints Administrator should advise the complainant that an external party would be used.

How is an appeal received?

All appeals must be submitted in writing to the Complaints Administrator within 10 working days of the complainant receiving the outcome from the formal process.

How is an appeal handled?

- The Complaints Administrator acknowledges the appeal.

This correspondence should acknowledge receipt of the appeal and provide a date for when a decision will be available as to whether there are grounds for an appeal.

- Inform the complainant of the decision in writing.

The Appeals Panel will ascertain if the request meets the grounds for appeal as per the Club's complaint policy. If an appeal is granted, details of the steps involved in the process and the expected timelines should be provided as part of the decision.

If the appeal is considered trivial or frivolous, the Complaints Administrator will advise the complainant of this on behalf of the Appeals Panel and will not deal any further with the complaint.

- Review of the Complaint

The Appeals Panel will re-examine the case, which may include consultation with all parties involved in the complaint. The Appeals Panel will provide the Chairperson with a report in writing along with any decision(s) or recommendation(s) arising from the appeal.

- Communicates the findings.

The Chairperson will liaise with the Complaints Administrator who will inform the complainant of the findings of the appeal. A copy of the report will be sent to the complainant also.

Timelines

The Complaints Administrator receives the appeal in writing. This correspondence should be received within 10 working days of the complainant receiving the outcome of their formal complaint.

The Complaints Administrator acknowledges the appeal within 7 working days.

Next Steps:

If the complainant remains dissatisfied it is open for the complainant to contact their Special Olympics Regional Office.

Recording an appeal

The Appeals Panel will record the following:

- Terms of reference
- Timeline/chronology
- The outcome/s of the appeal / review including whether it or any aspect of it was substantiated, any recommendations made to address problems identified and any decisions made on those recommendations, and
- Any outstanding actions that need to be followed up.
- Options for redress

Documents will be retained for a period determined as per Special Olympics Ireland Guidance for Clubs concerning GDPR and relevant legislation.