



# Comments, Complaints and Suggestions Policy

Adopted: September 2017  
Last Review: September 2017  
For Review: September 2020

## 1. Introduction

'Comments and Complaints' procedures are part of the process of empowering people who use our services and protecting their interests. Many people find it difficult to express worries, problems and concerns and it is therefore necessary to ensure that there is a climate which assures them that these will be listened to taken seriously and responded to speedily and fairly.

Having a 'Comments and Complaints' procedure is likely to ensure quality when it stems from a recognition of people's needs and rights. For this reason it is important that everyone involved in services knows about the procedure and are committed to the principles it embraces.

It is important that Age UK Oxfordshire has an effective complaints and comments procedure so that:

- we can resolve problems before they become complaints
- any complaints made are recognised and a procedure for dealing with them is provided
- the interests of people who use our services are protected and decisions can be challenged
- the quality of service can be improved by recognising people's rights and needs and by being responsive to their views
- an additional means of monitoring is available
- staff and volunteers are protected from the consequences of allowing unresolved problems to escalate

Older people are often afraid to complain in case their service is taken away from them or because they don't want to make trouble. It is important to introduce a positive element into the procedure and to make people comfortable about using it. The spirit in which a complaints procedure is implemented will largely determine its effectiveness.

It is also important that positive comments and suggestions are received in an appreciative manner. We must encourage people who use our service to tell us what we are doing right as well as what we are doing wrong. 'Ownership' of the philosophy behind the procedure by all staff and volunteers is essential.

## 2. General principals of the procedure

- **Is accessible:** Some people may have problems with a written procedure, we should be sensitive to the different ways of making information accessible. People should be encouraged to know where to go and who to ask for further advice and information
- **Is understood by staff and volunteers:** It is important that Board Members, paid staff and volunteers are fully conversant with the principles of this procedure. Issues of confidentiality and what constitutes a complaint need to be understood also.

- **Should provide prompt and considered response:** Replies must be prompt and considered so that people are not left in suspense for weeks/months. The complainant should be told what the timescale is and the organisation should maintain its deadline.
- **Has a strong problem solving element:** Most complaints pose problems, often trivial ones which can be resolved immediately by staff and volunteers. Sometimes these complaints are presented as comments. If everyone concerned knows there is a simple procedure, and follows it, an escalation of the problem into a major complaint can be avoided. The objective is not to apportion blame but to resolve the problem, not to find fault with people but to give older people a better service.
- **Safeguards confidentiality:** All those involved in processing the complaint must be ensured it is treated in confidence. All complaints must be kept secure from casual perusal.
- **Will provide continuous learning and development:** All Comments, Suggestions and Complaints will be reviewed regularly by the Senior Management Team and used to help improve and develop our services. The Board of Trustees will be appraised of situations via their regular Trustee meetings unless a more urgent intervention is required. Trustees will take the opportunity to learn, improve and evaluate our services and responses on a regular basis.

### 3. Comments

It is always helpful to hear what people think about our organisation and the services we provide. If a positive comment is received about any aspect of the organisation it should be shared with all involved.

Comments are welcome because:

- I. They can help influence policy decisions of the organisation
- II. They can help maintain the standards of our services
- III. They can raise issues of real importance and can lead to a change for the better.

Comments should be recorded in the relevant document and shared with those involved and used appropriately.

### 4. Complaints

#### What is a complaint?

A complaint is often couched in terms of a comment or suggestion, or it presents a problem in the first instance, it can relate to many different things and appear to be quite trivial. However, all complaints should be listened to seriously and sometimes a 'trivial' complaint needs to be acted upon, because it reveals a hidden issue

Complaints can relate to:

- The quality or nature of the service provided
- The conduct of the staff
- Administration within the organisation
- Discrimination

- Provision of accurate information
- Failure to provide information
- Unreasonable delays
- Policy of the organisation

#### **Definition of a complaint**

- Complaints are usually about individual instances, not policy issues or generalisations
- A complaint is not a comment of suggestion which is often positive
- A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction

#### **Who can make a complaint?**

Anyone including people who use our services, carers, volunteers and the general public. Complaints by employees will be dealt with under the terms of their individual contract of employment or as laid down by the Grievance Procedure.

### **5. The procedure**

There will be three stages to the procedure:

1. The informal or problem solving stage
2. The formal stage
3. The review stage

It should be made clear to everyone that the purpose of the complaints procedure is to solve problems and come to agreement as quickly as possible. Throughout the whole procedure the complainant will have the right to be accompanied by a friend or advisor.

The whole process must be recorded in the Complaints Register and reported to Line Manager/Chief Executive as appropriate.

#### **The informal or problem solving stage**

Before the procedure is implemented the complaint will be recorded in virtual complaints book (secured on the Management Drive). Normal good practice should sort out small grumbles and queries to the satisfaction of all involved without taking the issue to the next stage. Some complaints will go to Stage 2 if the complaint is sufficiently serious.

This stage gives everybody involved with the organisation the opportunity to express views and dissatisfaction.

#### **In the event of an oral complaint:**

- Listen to the complainant, notes should be carefully taken and checked back for accuracy.
- Clarification to be sought from the complainant on how they think the situation can be resolved or put right and what their desired outcome would be.

- The complaint should be entered onto the Virtual Complaints Book.
- The relevant member of staff needs to be informed, investigate and provide a written response within 28 days. A written response can only be sent out if an address (email or postal) but a copy is filed online regardless.

**If a written complaint is received:**

- On receipt of their correspondence an acknowledgement will be sent within 5 working days by the Service Manager.
- Clarification to be sought from the complainant on how they think the situation can be resolved or put right and what their desired outcome would be.
- The complaint should be dealt with by the relevant member of staff without delay and recorded in the Virtual Complaints Book.
- The relevant member of staff must investigate (after consultation with their line manager) and provide a written response within 28 days. A copy is filed.

If the problem cannot be solved at Stage 1, the complainant should be advised and assisted where necessary, to take the problem to stage 2 (the Formal Stage).

**The Formal Stage**

Taking the complaint to stage 2 doesn't imply that problem solving activities will be abandoned. The problem can still be resolved through good practice and with understanding. The significance of this stage is that it enters a process where other people are openly involved in the consideration, discussion and possible investigation.

To formalise the complaint, it will need to be put in writing and an acknowledgement will be sent back within 5 working days upon receipt.

The Service Manager (escalating to Senior Manager and Chief Executive if it requires) will make a full investigation of the complaint taking on board the views of all parties involved. The complainant will be informed within 28 days the outcome of the investigation. If there is a delay then this must be informed in writing. The whole process from initial registering of complaint to the outcome of stage 2 should not exceed 3 months. If the outcome is not to their satisfaction they will be advised to take the complaint to stage 3.

**The Review Stage**

If the complaint has not been settled at the formal stage and the complainant is not satisfied either with the outcome or the way the investigation was carried out then the complaint can be considered by further escalation at the review panel.

To move to the review stage they must write to the Chief Executive seeking a review and outlining the reasons for this, no more than 28 days from the date on which they were informed of the outcome at Stage 2.

The purpose of the Review Panel is to give the complainant the opportunity to have their complaint heard by a group of who haven't been involved at any other stage of the process. The panel will re-examine the complaint and the decision taken. The Panel will consist of three people; one will be a trustee of Age UK Oxfordshire.

The Review Panel will meet within the designated time of the complaint being referred to them. This should not exceed 28 working days.

The Review Panel will have access to all the information and people involved, in order to come to a decision. This may consist of conciliatory action, such as changes in practice or procedure.

The Chair of the Review Panel will write to the complainant within 24 hours of the decision being taken. The decision of the Panel is final.

## **6. Fundraising Complaints**

The charity works hard to ensure that all of our fundraising activities are planned, prepared and executed properly, however we recognise that sometimes this might not happen. If a complaint has not been resolved satisfactorily by the internal review process (as detailed above) it is possible to escalate the complaint to the Fundraising Regulator. Age UK Oxfordshire is a member of the Fundraising Regulator and agrees to fundraise in accordance with the Code of Fundraising Practice and the Fundraising Promise.

### **Staff Reassurance**

The Complaints procedure can provide practical benefits to staff by providing a clear and understandable mechanism for the resolution of disputes. Staff have the right to expect management support and assistance throughout the process. These procedures seek not to apportion blame but to establish a basis for dialogue and discussion.

Signed:



Date: 15/9/2017

Name: Penny Thewlis

Position held: Chief Executive