

Handling Complaints

Good practice guidance to assist you in managing
and responding to complaints



Receiving a complaint

On receiving a complaint, have a discussion with your Commissioner and then follow Stages 1 to 4 (see pages 4 to 7). You should aim to acknowledge the complaint within three to five days. The safety of our members and the reputation of guiding are paramount and at any stage circumstances may dictate that this matter is referred to the Country or Region Chief Commissioner who may invoke the disciplinary process. Once the complaint is resolved, the process can be stopped at any stage.

Key message: Is this a complaint? Or should it be dealt with using a different process?

Make sure you recognise whether the person really is complaining. Are they asking a question or making an allegation about a member's behaviour?

Key message: Listen to what the complainant is saying.

Acknowledge that they are angry and let them know that the issue will be looked into.

If you are the volunteer/member of staff who receives a telephone call from the complainant, listen to what they are saying. Remember that you do not know the full story, only the complainant's version. Do not try to provide a response or defend the position of Girlguiding, or your own position. This type of response will make the complainant more angry and the conversation will be more difficult to manage.

When you are discussing the complaint with the complainant, try to find out the following details.

- What exactly is the complaint?
- When did the event happen - date and time?
- Where did the event happen?
- Who else saw or heard what happened?
- What does the person want to happen as a result of having their complaint investigated?

Key message: Make sure that you understand exactly what the complainant is saying and record it in their words.

Using your own words can change the meaning. Write down exactly what they said and get them to check the wording.

Key message: Always ask about the complainant's desired outcome.

This information is valuable when you go on to investigate the complaint. Complainants will often know what they want to happen as a result of complaining. It is important to discuss this with them, without promising anything. While Girlguiding may not be able to meet their expectations, this question will provide you with more information about the complaint.

Key message: You do not need to deal with complaints alone.

Contact your local Commissioner for advice and support.

Key message: An immediate positive response will often prevent a minor complaint escalating.

Many of the complaints received are dealt with immediately at source by a unit's Leadership Team and do not enter the complaint procedure.

Key message: Recognise that there is a complaint and start to respond to it.

None of us likes to respond to complaints or be the subject of a complaint. We hope it will not happen. However, if you ignore a complaint it will not go away - it will actually grow and become more complicated to deal with.

Key message: Keep things in perspective and be positive.

Remember that we are a very large and successful organisation and most young people, parents and other organisations who have contact with us are completely satisfied with how we do things. We are one of the most respected children's charities in the UK. Only a minority of people are actually dissatisfied with what we do and make a complaint.

Complaints handling procedure - who does what?

Note: Complaints received at Girlguiding Headquarters are forwarded to the County Commissioner who investigates and responds. Complaints should be acknowledged within three to five days and resolved within approximately 28 days.

Complaint is received by Leader or Commissioner.

Leader or Commissioner investigates and responds.

The investigation should be carried out personally by the investigating Leader or Commissioner. The response should satisfactorily answer all issues.

Records are kept of conversations and actions.

The next-level Commissioner is kept informed and asked for advice as necessary.

Complainant is not satisfied.

OR

Complaint is forwarded to County Commissioner.

County Commissioner investigates and responds.

The response should satisfactorily answer all issues. An agreed time frame should be adhered to.

Records are kept of conversations and actions.

Complainant is not satisfied.



Complaint is forwarded to Country/Region.

Complaint review.

Details are forwarded to the Country/Region Office and Chief Commissioner for a review. The Chief Commissioner will not reinvestigate but will write to inform the complainant of the outcome of the review undertaken.

This is the end of the complaint procedure and Girlguiding can take no further action in respect of the complaint.

Stage 1: Investigating a complaint

The Commissioner* should conduct an investigation to establish facts by speaking to those involved.

* Where the term Commissioner is used, it could also mean an individual nominated by the Commissioner to act on her behalf.

Key message: Spend time developing understanding, discussing and seeking advice about a complaint before launching into investigation.

When a complaint is received, make sure that it really is a complaint. Ask yourself these questions.

- Is this just a question?
- Is this just a comment about the quality of guiding but not really a complaint?
- Is this a volunteer who is unhappy about the way they are being treated?
- Is the person actually making an allegation? Are they telling us that they think a member is being abused? Or are they alleging that a member is abusing someone?
- If the complaint is upheld, would this constitute a criminal offence?
- If this complaint was upheld would it result in the restriction or withdrawal of membership of Girlguiding of the person concerned?

Key message: Talk to the complainant.

This will help you to understand what you are investigating and develop an understanding of the complainant's real experience of the issues they are describing to you.

If you are the person investigating the complaint, you will obtain a clearer understanding of what happened if you have a face-to-face meeting with the complainant. Sometimes this is not possible and in that case you need to discuss the complaint in a telephone call.

At all times, maintain confidentiality as well as normal courtesy and consideration. Keep confidential written notes of meetings and telephone conversations which are signed and dated.

During the investigation stage, keep the complainant informed of any investigations taking place and what progress is being made. The investigation should be completed as quickly as possible but ideally it should take no longer than 28 days.

You must seek further advice from Girlguiding Membership Support Services if it is a safeguarding matter.

Key message: Be thorough.

A thorough investigation makes it easy to determine the response to the complaint and explain the response to the complainant. Thoroughness may also prevent the complainant using the next stage of the complaint procedure.

When you investigate you are seeking a response to the main question 'What happened in this situation?'. You need to cover the following points.

- Who saw/heard this incident/event? Talk to these people and record their versions.
- Do the dates and times correspond?

- Was this a legitimate guiding activity/event?
- Had the correct Girlguiding procedures/policies/forms been used?
Ask yourself what would have been 'good guiding' in the situation. Did this happen?

Key message: Record your findings.

Do not include speculation, only facts that can be supported by evidence.

Stage 2: Responding to the complaint

Once the Commissioner has gathered enough facts to understand the complaint, she will be able to discuss the points raised.

In some cases, it may be advisable to have a local meeting arranged on neutral ground with those involved. The Commissioner may wish to be accompanied to such a meeting. The meeting should be an informal discussion and should normally take place as quickly as possible after the Commissioner has completed her investigation, and ideally no more than one month from the date when she received the complaint.

Following any discussion or meeting, the Commissioner should write to all parties within an agreed timescale outlining the outcome of the meeting and any actions required. She should inform the individual of their right to take their complaint to Stage 4 within 14 days of the date of the letter.

Key message: Discussing the response to be made to the complaint is time well spent.

It is essential to be open and honest in the reply to the complainant. This also helps to develop good practice locally in the management of complaints.

When you are discussing the complaint these are the questions you need to ask yourselves.

- Do the findings of the investigation support what the complainant has told you?
- If the findings do not support the application and you will not be upholding the complaint, was it actually 'good guiding' that took place? Sometimes we do not get things wrong but we could have provided a better experience. If this is the case, you need to let the complainant know this.
- If the complaint is upheld, what did we do wrong? As well as apologising, what can we do to put things right for the complainant?
- What learning points has this identified for Girlguiding? We need to make sure that this does not happen to anyone else. Will the learning just affect local guiding or is it something that needs to be dealt with by the whole organisation?

Key message: Consider the words you use carefully.

If the complaint is not upheld, the complainant will continue to feel very upset and angry. Acknowledge how they feel and do not ignore this, then go on to explain why the complaint cannot be upheld.

If policies and procedures were followed but only the minimum standard was delivered, explain to the complainant what we would have expected a 'good guiding' experience to have been.

Make sure that you explain what has been learned from the complaint and how this will be put into action.

See page 8 for a sample letter of response.

Stage 3: Learning from complaints

All complaints should be dealt with on an individual basis. Many people who complain simply want the recognition that something has gone wrong and an apology for it.

In some situations it can be clearly identified that the complainant has suffered financial loss. In these cases a discretionary payment may be considered.

Sometimes the complaint is about 'lost opportunity'. For example, a young member may not have been given information about a Baden-Powell Adventure weekend and was therefore 'out of time' for completing the Award. Careful consideration should be given to making an exemption.

Complainants often want compensation for their experience of stress and frustration. These are very difficult outcomes to make a decision about. In exceptional circumstances, for example where an event has a policy that funds are non-refundable and this has not been made clear, reimbursement may be considered.

Every complaint is different and must be handled according to its context. People experience things differently and one policy will not fit all. Talk to your Commissioner and seek her advice.

Key message: Do not forget the learning - you do not want this to happen again and then have to repeat the process!

Once you have spent time and effort investigating the complaint, it is easy to forget about dealing with all the actions required in relation to learning. Have a plan for doing this. Does it just involve local guiding or is it applicable across the whole organisation? Have you shared the learning (anonymously) with your local team? Sometimes a period of time needs to pass before you know if things are working. Have you built in a review system for your learning?

Stage 4: Review

We hope that the complainant will be satisfied with the response they have received. However, if they are still unhappy they can ask for the decision about the complaint to be reviewed.

This will be done by the Chief Commissioner for the Region or the Country in which the complaint is made. (Note: The Chief Commissioner may decide to delegate this role to a senior member of Girlguiding.)

It is important to remember that this is not a reinvestigation process. Leaders will not take kindly to being interviewed again. This stage is about considering carefully how the investigation was carried out and whether this was thorough enough.

- Is the response which was made supported by the findings of the investigation?

- Have we done enough to put things right for the complainant if the complaint was upheld?
- Has the complainant been informed of what we have learned about this complaint?
- Have we responded to the learning locally, or throughout the organisation?
- Did we need to go back to the complainant to review any action we said we would take, and has this happened?

If the Chief Commissioner feels the decision was the correct one, the complainant should receive a letter to inform them and let them know the reasons for this decision.

See page 10 for a sample letter.

If she feels that the investigation had not been thorough, she will need to ask for the investigation or parts of it to be carried out again. It may be appropriate for someone else to carry out this further investigation. After receiving a response, the complainant will be offered the opportunity to return to the complaints review stage.

The Chief Commissioner's decision is final and marks the end of the complaint process.

Further information

Links with other procedures

Girlguiding Complaint procedures: <http://guidingmanual.guk.org.uk> > Policies > Complaints

Girlguiding Safeguarding Policy: <http://guidingmanual.guk.org.uk> > Policies > Safety and Safeguarding Policy

Girlguiding Disciplinary process: Please speak to your Commissioner

Further contact details

Membership Support Services

Girlguiding

17-19 Buckingham Palace Road

London SW1W 0PT

Tel: 020 7834 6242

Email: msswebconcerns@girlguiding.org.uk

Website: www.girlguiding.org.uk

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Appendix 1: Sample letter of response

11 March 2012

Dear Ms Bloggs,

Girlguiding Complaint Procedure

When we met at your home on 10 March 2012 I provided you with a response to the complaint which I had investigated on your behalf. I am now writing to you to confirm the content of our conversation.

This is the complaint which you made and the background to that complaint:

You told me that you had not been a volunteer very long and were currently working on the Leadership Qualification. You described how you had a very good Mentor and felt you got on well together. Your Mentor had been a volunteer for a long time and you had visited her unit. You are concerned that the unit you are working with is not as well run as your Mentor's unit and the programme for the Rainbows is not delivered in the way it should be. You do not have a planning meeting with the other Leaders and so until you arrive at the unit meeting you do not know what will happen. You would like to know beforehand so that you can prepare things. As you are new to being a Rainbow Leader, you do not always know how to do things and need time to find out.

To assist me in investigating your complaint I used the knowledge I have gained from the range of roles I have had as a volunteer with Girlguiding over many years.

I made a visit to your unit to watch you and the other Leaders run the programme for one evening.

I then met the Leadership Team and you were part of that meeting. We talked about the issues that you had raised. The Leaders were upset, as you observed, that you had contacted me before trying to sort out the issues with them first. However, they did understand that as you are new it was difficult for you to approach them first, as you do not really understand fully how the Rainbow programme should be delivered.

The Leaders acknowledged that they had not been to trainings for a long time. They both have fairly demanding jobs and one of them is the main carer for her mother who has Alzheimer's disease.

We agreed that your Mentor will attend a unit programme planning meeting with all the Leaders in the unit and help you all to plan the details of the next few meetings together.

You all agreed to attend the next County Training Day together.

We also looked at other changes you could make to help you to work together better as a Leadership Team.

I have upheld your complaint and hope that you are satisfied with the way in which I looked into your concerns and the arrangements we made together to resolve the issues.

If you are not satisfied you can ask for the decision I have made to be reviewed by Mrs Ann

Other, the Chief Commissioner for the Region. She will not reinvestigate the complaint but will review the method I have used to investigate the complaint and the decision I made based on these findings. She will inform you of her decision in writing within 28 days.

The contact details for Mrs Other are:

Girlguiding Anyregion Office

34 High Street

Anytown

GI2 5RL

Yours sincerely

Lucy Leader

Leadership Qualification Coordinator, Girlguiding Anycounty

Appendix 2: Sample review response letter

6 May 2012

Dear Ms Bloggs,

Girlguiding Complaint Procedure: Review process

I have received your request to review the decision made about the complaint which Lucy Leader investigated in March this year.

I have now reviewed the decision made by Lucy Leader, and the method I have used and the decision I have made are set out below.

In order to review the decision about your complaint, I have read the following documents.

- The letter from Lucy Leader dated 15 February 2012 which acknowledges your complaint and provides you with information about how the complaint will be investigated.
- The letter dated 11 March 2012 from Lucy Leader, who investigated your complaint. In this letter she describes how she investigated your complaint and the decision she made about your complaint.
- I have read carefully the letter you wrote to me on 17 April 2012 in which you explain why you are not satisfied with the decisions made about your complaint.

I have also spoken to the District Commissioner about the new issues you have raised.

In your letter you told me that initially you were satisfied with the way in which your complaint had been looked into. You were hopeful that the Unit Leaders would attend trainings and that you would start to have good programme planning meetings. You have now had time to reflect on things and you feel that the other Leaders are 'not up to it' and should be made to resign as volunteers. You feel that they do not have time to volunteer with the Rainbow unit. Only one of them came to the meeting with your Mentor to work out a programme for next term with the unit. You are fairly certain that they will not attend the next County Training. You feel it is not fair on the girls if they continue.

I am satisfied that Lucy Leader carried out a very thorough investigation of your complaint and it was good practice to meet you and the other Leaders in the unit to discuss the issues you had raised. The plans you made together about 'a way forward' were very good and achievable.

Your Mentor has met you and one of the Leaders and I understand from your District Commissioner that you produced a very exciting programme for next term. It was unfortunate that the other Leader could not be there. I understand that she did provide an apology and let you know that her mother was ill and she needed to stay at home to look after her. You and the other Leader can meet her later and discuss the programme you have planned for next term.

As it is another couple of months before the applications have to be submitted for your County Training Day, you cannot accurately predict that the Leaders will not attend.

The further information you have provided does not in any way provide a reason to ask either of these Leaders to stop volunteering. They have both provided excellent service over many years.

I am sure that the plans set in place by Lucy Leader will be effective if you allow time for this to happen. Your District Commissioner will keep in touch with you and the other Leaders in the unit to support you and to ensure that there is a positive outcome for you all.

I feel that you have received an appropriate response to your complaint.

This is the final response to your complaint and we cannot make any further investigations about the issues you have raised.

Yours sincerely

Mrs Ann Other
Chief Commissioner, Girlguiding Anyregion