

# Complaints Policy and Procedures

The Elders of **Christ Church Dunstable** approved the following complaints policy and procedure.

Policy last reviewed	Last review conducted/approved by
January 2023	Elders

## Introduction

By raising a formal complaint with a church, you are asking them to devote time and resources and potentially finance to properly addressing your concerns. In some cases, this will be perfectly legitimate, but a formal complaint **should only be raised** after all other methods of resolution have been exhausted. In other words, raising a formal complaint should be the last step taken, not the first.

It is further assumed that all Biblical avenues for resolution have already been exhausted. If a grievance is against a fellow church member, it should first be dealt with in the manner of Matthew 18 (v15-16) and 1 Timothy 5 (v19-20).

If it is in relation to a pastor or elder, then 1 Timothy 5 should be followed. It is only once these Biblical and informal resolution processes have been followed that a formal complaint should be raised.

A formal complaint is not the same as raising a concern. The latter can often be dealt with by taking the matter up with the leader or leaders at the church long before there is a need to raise it to the level of a formal complaint.

## FIEC Expectations

This policy is designed to give confidence to church leaders, church members and those raising complaints, managing expectations, and ensuring that there is an agreed process to take these matters forward.

All churches with charitable status and affiliated to FIEC must have a safeguarding policy. This is a requirement set out by the Charity Commission, as can be seen on the [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) website [here](#).

We are pleased to be able to offer this resource to our affiliated churches free of charge to assist them in handling complaints. This policy will help to further strengthen existing safeguarding policy and procedures.

This policy is designed to support FIEC churches to respond well when handling a complaint.

This template policy and procedures are 'best practice' documents. A church can tailor it to their specific needs. Each church differs in its structure and governance, but FIEC or Christian Safeguarding Services (who drafted this policy) will not be held responsible for any amendments you make to this template.

FIEC is a Fellowship of self-governing independent churches. FIEC is not a denomination that exercises any central control over churches; our churches are joined together with a common identity and purpose. The practice of fellowship means we work together for the advance of the gospel.

Churches affiliated to FIEC are independent organisations, having their own governance arrangements and they are not accountable to FIEC. In practice this means:

- FIEC has no jurisdiction over local church arrangements.
- FIEC can provide advice and support but is unable to take on a judicial role when dealing with complaints.
- FIEC can, under certain conditions where both church and the complainant agree, provide mediation support. See [fiec.org.uk](http://fiec.org.uk) for details [here](#).

If support is needed at any stage during this process, Christian Safeguarding Services (CSS) have an advice line detailed on their website at [thecss.co.uk](http://thecss.co.uk) and they also offer training. Some of these services may be chargeable.

## Definitions

It is important to understand what these mean

### A Complaint

A complaint is a **claim** that someone has been treated **unfairly, unsatisfactorily, inappropriately**, or that they are dissatisfied in some way with their treatment.

### An Allegation

- 1- **An allegation**, in law, is a claim of an unproven fact by a party in a pleading, charge, or defence. Until they can be proved, allegations remain merely assertions
- 2- **A Safeguarding allegation**: A concern or claim that an adult who has access to vulnerable people (*children, young people under 18 and adults at risk of abuse*) has caused them harm. Safeguarding policies and procedures should be followed.

### Whistleblowing

A concern that **practices or procedures** in the church or charity places people at risk. **Whistleblowing** is the act of telling someone internal to the organisation or to the public that the organisation you work for either in a paid or voluntary capacity is doing something illegal, immoral, illicit, unsafe, or fraudulent, or out of line with the standards set in the governing documents. A whistle-blower is a person who comes forward and shares his/her knowledge on any wrongdoing which he/she thinks is happening in the whole organisation or in a specific department. A whistle-blower could be an employee, volunteer or a person accessing the organisation who becomes aware of the activities listed above. A whistleblowing policy should form part of your church's safeguarding policies. Personal grievances (for example bullying, harassment, discrimination) are not covered by whistleblowing law.

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# Complaints Policy

## 1. Purpose of this complaints policy

The primary purpose of the **Christ Church Dunstable** complaints policy and procedure is to provide a process for dealing with complaints relating to the behaviour of, or activities and decisions taken by, the church's staff, Elders, or volunteers.

This policy and procedures aim to provide staff, members, volunteers, Pastors, and Elders with clear and simple instructions as to how to respond to a complaint and how concerns should be handled.

**N.B They are not provided for training purposes and will not be used as a substitute for training.**

This policy outlines how seriously **Christ Church Dunstable** take complaints:

- How **Christ Church Dunstable** will deal with them appropriately.
- How **Christ Church Dunstable** will use complaints as an opportunity to learn and improve for the future.

## 2. Christ Church Dunstable's commitment

This policy applies to everyone who works on our behalf whether they are Elders, senior leaders, group / ministry leaders, paid staff, volunteers, or others working on our behalf.

**Christ Church Dunstable** will provide a fair complaints procedure which is clear, transparent, and easy for anyone wishing to make a complaint.

We will publicise the existence of our complaints policy and procedure so that people know how/who to contact to make a complaint.

We will ensure everyone at **Christ Church Dunstable** knows who to pass a complaint to if one is received.

**Christ Church Dunstable** will ensure all complaints are investigated fairly and in a timely way, following the policies and processes laid out here

- Any investigation of the concerns must adhere to **Christ Church Dunstable** procedures in relation to conflict of interest. *In this context, a conflict of interest would be anything that inhibits or could be seen to inhibit a fair and impartial examination of the complaint. For example: a family relationship (spouse, parent, child, brother, sister). If there was an allegation against the whole eldership, one of the elders could not investigate. Also, if the complaint was around a particular area of ministry, it can't be investigated by someone also involved in that ministry area.*

- Any person(s) appointed to investigate the complaint must have sufficient authority within **Christ Church Dunstable** to avoid either intentional or unintentional interference with the process including existing relationships.

We will ensure that complaints are, wherever possible, resolved and do our best to see that relationships are repaired.

**Christ Church Dunstable's** leaders will reflect on the experiences to help improve what we do and how we do it

### 3. The definition of a complaint and escalation stages of a complaint

A complaint is any expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, about any aspect of church life. This can be about a person or persons, an activity, or a group or about a service provided by the church.

This complaints policy outlines a **three-stage complaints procedure**:

- **Stage One** is part of the formal complaints procedure, where resolution of the complaint or issues is achieved by informal conversations rather than a formal investigation. Please note that this stage is optional and that if the complainant wishes to commence at Stage Two, they have every right to do so. However, the complainant must be able to demonstrate why Stage Two is necessary. Failure to provide the evidence would mean that the complaint would not escalate but would commence at Stage One.
- **Stage Two: Formal Stage.** This is the stage where formal processes should be used which includes an investigation into the complaint.
- **Stage Three:** Appeal

### 4. Source of complaints

Complaints may be received from several sources (e.g. phone, in person, email, etc.). **Christ Church Dunstable** will establish whether the complainant wishes to commence at Stage One (informal resolution) or Stage Two (formal investigation).

### 5. Responsibility

**Christ Church Dunstable's** leaders will appoint a person responsible for receiving complaints.

The decision-making group will be the elders or a representative of the elders and other senior leaders.

The management and oversight for this policy and its implementation sits with the Elders of **Christ Church Dunstable**.

## 6. Receiving Complaints

Christ Church Dunstable has a specific form for recording complaints and ideally, all complaints should be raised using this form which is found on the Complaints page of the church website. If, however, the church receives a written complaint which is not on the correct form, the person designated to receive the complaints will ensure that all the information required for the form has been included. If not, they will request the additional information that would have been provided had the form been completed. Complaints can also be made verbally. Where a verbal complaint is received the nominated recipient of complaints will:

1. Complete the complaint form within 48 hours of the receipt of complaint.
2. Write down the facts and circumstances of the complaint and any relevant background information.
3. Take the complainant's name, address and telephone number and names of any others involved.
4. Note down the relationship of the complainant to **Christ Church Dunstable** (for example: attendee, member, parent).
5. Signpost the complainant to these procedures so that they understand the process that will be followed.
6. Advise the complainant what will happen next and how long it will take.
7. Confirm with the complainant that the record accurately reflects the conversations that took place and that it captures adequately the concern that they are raising.
8. Establish with the complainant their desired outcome of the complaint (e.g. an apology, some other form of restoration or actions they wish to see taken such as changes to policies or procedures, etc.).

## 7. Formal acknowledgement

A formal acknowledgment of receipt of the complaint should be issued to the complainant within 7 days.

## 8. Plan Response

A decision should be taken about the nature of the complaint and how it will be handled. This decision will consider such factors as:

- Whether the threshold for reporting to statutory services been met
- Whether the threshold for any regulatory reporting has been met
- Whether the threshold for an internal investigation has been met and if so
  - Who will be involved
  - How Christ Church Dunstable will resolve it
  - By when it should be resolved

## 9. Communicate Response

Once the planned actions in point 8 above have been agreed, then the process and their point of contact will be communicated to the complainant.

# Procedures – Resolving Complaints

## Stage One: Informal Resolution

Wherever possible, the preference for **Christ Church Dunstable** is to follow the Scriptural principles for reconciling differences (e.g. Matthew 18 (v15-16) and 1 Timothy 5 (v19-20)).

However, on occasion, attempts to resolve an issue informally may fail or may not even be appropriate.

A formal complaints process is available for such cases. It is hoped that during this stage, at Stage One, most complaints can be resolved by talking, sharing, and achieving a shared understanding of the issues.

It would normally be advisable to meet or speak with the complainant to try to resolve the issue at this initial, informal stage. Care will be taken to ensure that the environment is conducive to constructive discussion.

For example, it would not generally be appropriate to ask a person to attend a meeting with all the elders of the church because this could result in a significant level of intimidation which could prevent an impartial and balanced outcome.

Pastoral support should be offered to the complainant and any other party involved and the complainant should be invited to bring along a friend to support them should they wish to.

Please note, this procedure does not prevent issues being discussed over multiple meetings if this is acceptable to both the complainant and the church's representative.

Once the discussions are complete, the outcome needs to be agreed. Possible outcomes would be:

- **Resolved:** agreement has been reached and any follow up actions clearly agreed, including timeframes for the actions and how completion will be communicated to the complainant
- **Partially resolved:** Some of the issues have been resolved or some aspects have been agreed but others could not be resolved
- **Unresolved:** agreement could not be reached

A written summary of the discussions, along with any decisions and actions agreed and areas that are unresolved will be kept, a copy of which will be provided to the complainant and a further copy for the church's own records.

The complainant will be asked to confirm that the record is accurate, and the church's record will be kept securely for future reference.



If the matter is not fully resolved, the complainant should be asked whether they wish to escalate the matter to Stage Two. If so, the procedure detailed below (Stage Two) should be followed.

If the complainant does not wish to escalate, the church should consider whether there are outstanding issues that need to be considered formally. It is possible that the complainant does not wish to escalate for a variety of legitimate reasons, however, issues may have been raised that are of concern to the church and so the church may wish to continue to investigate or address the issues outside the formal process. In such circumstances, a formal record should be kept of decisions taken and actions completed.

## Stage Two: Escalation and Investigation Process

Where the complainant wishes to bypass Stage One, the complaint, once clarified, will be considered by **the Complaints Officer (Evelyn Sharpe)**.

If the complainant feels that the issue has not been satisfactorily resolved at Stage One, they must formally notify **Evelyn Sharpe** within 14 days. The complainant must clearly indicate the nature of their concerns and the reason for seeking a more formal response. Where, due to complexity or circumstance, this 14-day period is unrealistic, a longer timeframe can be negotiated between the church and the complainant but this extension must be requested within the 14-day period.

- The complainant will set out in writing the details of the complaint including supporting evidence.
- Written acknowledgement of receipt of a request for Stage 2 will be provided within 7 days.
- The acknowledgement will name a specific contact person and will indicate the timeframe for a decision on how the matter will be handled.
  - Pastoral support should be offered to the complainants and to anyone else concerned.
- The elders overseeing the complaint will decide on an individual or team to investigate and will define the scope and process of the investigation.
- The nominated individual or team will then notify the complainant in writing of the investigation process and anticipated timeframes.
- If the complaint relates to a specific person, they should be informed, and they will be given opportunity to respond.
- Written notes of interviews will be taken and held securely.
- The person against whom the complaint has been made should also be informed at all stages of the investigation and of the outcome.
- If there are delays to the timeframe, a progress report should be sent as soon as possible to the complainant with an indication of when a full response will be complete.
- 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.

## Stage Three: Appeal Process

If the complainant is still dissatisfied with the process or outcome of the investigation, they can appeal the decision in writing to the **Senior Pastor** within 28 days of receipt of the outcome.

- The complainant’s appeal must clearly state the reasons for the appeal and provide evidence as to why they disagree with the outcome of the investigation.
  - The appeal is NOT a reinvestigation of the original complaint.
- The **Senior Pastor**, supported as required by other nominated individuals, should then:
  - Establish the scope and process of the appeal.
  - Review the process and findings of the stage 3 complaint to establish as to whether any further investigation is required.
  - Once any necessary inquiries/investigations are complete, make a final decision on the robustness and reliability of the stage 2 process and findings.
- The outcome of the appeal should be reported back to the elders who will sign off on the appeal.
- The complainant will then be notified of the outcome.
  - The complainant will be notified of any options to raise the concerns further, these would include a complaint or a referral to the charity commission, or to statutory services if they believe those thresholds were met.
- **The decision taken at this stage is final.**

## Vexatious Complaints

If the church leadership and Elders conclude that a complaint is vexatious (i.e., unreasonable, and repeated, once the above processes have been exhausted) the church may consider exercising church discipline if the complainant is a member. If the complainant is not a church member, the church is under no obligation to investigate further the complaint made once all available avenues of resolution have been explored.

## Confidentiality and Information Sharing

All complaints will be handled sensitively and confidentially. Information concerning the complaint will only be shared on a need-to-know basis and shared only with those who need to know the information. All relevant data protection procedures or GDPR requirements will be followed.

## 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 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
  - “I understand that this situation is difficult.”

- We hope to be able to come to a swift conclusion for them
- 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 unreasonable 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.

Please see the separate attachment on the Complaints Policy section of the CCD website for the complaint form template that should be completed and returned by email.