



# Complaints Policy and Procedures

## Preamble

Regardless of how well Alderholt Chapel is run, there will inevitably be times when things go wrong and we receive complaints. Showing that, as a family of believers, we take complaints seriously will go a long way not only to resolving them, but also to restoring relationships and rebuilding trust. This policy and its associated guidelines provide the basis for handling complaints in a confidential, timely and appropriate manner.

Our policy and procedures come in two parts:

- a leaders' guide which is designed to help the Trustees of Alderholt Chapel to deal with complaints in a confidential, timely and appropriate manner; and
- a user's guide which is designed to help an individual complainant to know how to lodge a complaint and what to expect when they do.

The trustees of **Alderholt Chapel** approved this complaints policy and procedure on 24/06/2025. It was sent out to the church members on 25/06/2025 ahead of the July 2025 meeting and subsequently approved by the members.

Policy last reviewed	Last review conducted/approved by

## Leaders' Guide

### Introduction

By raising a formal complaint, an individual is asking the church to devote time and resources and potentially finance to properly address their 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. 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 a ministry leader or the elders of the church long before there is a need to raise it to the level of a formal complaint.

## **EFCC Expectations**

As a church with charitable status and affiliated to EFCC, Alderholt Chapel has a safeguarding policy; it is available on the church website [www.alderholtchapel.org](http://www.alderholtchapel.org). This complaints policy strengthens our existing safeguarding policy and procedures. It is designed to give confidence to church leaders, church members and those raising complaints by managing expectations and ensuring that there is an agreed process to take these matters forward.

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

- EFCC has no jurisdiction over local church arrangements.
- EFCC can provide advice and support but is unable to take on a judicial role when dealing with complaints.

If support is needed at any stage during this process, our safeguarding partner (see safeguarding policy) has a helpline,

There is a separate Grievance Procedure which covers any employment related issues. However, for anything not covered within the scope of the Grievance Procedure, staff may raise a complaint under this procedure.

## **Definitions**

It is important to understand what these terms mean.

### **A Complaint**

A complaint is a claim, whether justified or not, that someone has been treated unfairly, unkindly or inappropriately, or that they are dissatisfied in some way with their treatment. This can be about a person, or persons, an activity, or a group or about a ministry provided by the church.

## An Allegation

- 1- An allegation, in law, is a claim or assertion of an unproven fact by a party in a pleading, charge, or defence. Until it can be proved, an allegation remains merely an assertion.
- 2- A safeguarding allegation is 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. In that case, safeguarding policies and procedures should be followed.

## Whistleblowing

Whistleblowing is the act of telling someone internal to the church or to the public that the practices or procedures of the church are placing people at risk, or that the church is doing something illegal, immoral, illicit, unsafe or fraudulent, or out of line with the standards set in its governing documents. A whistle-blower is a person who comes forward and shares his/her knowledge of such wrongdoing which he/she thinks is happening in the church as a whole or in a specific ministry of the church. A whistleblower could be an employee, a volunteer or a person accessing the church who becomes aware of the activities listed above. Whistleblowing will be incorporated in Alderholt Chapel's safeguarding policies. Personal grievances (for example bullying, harassment, discrimination) are not covered by whistleblowing law.

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# Alderholt Chapel

## Complaints Policy

### 1. Purpose of this complaints policy

The primary purpose of the Alderholt Chapel complaints policy and procedure is to provide an agreed process for dealing with complaints relating to the behaviour of, or activities and decisions taken by, the church's staff, elders, deacons or volunteers.

These policy and procedures aim to provide staff and volunteers, elders, deacons, or officers/elders with clear and simple instructions as to how respond to a complaint and how concerns should be handled.

This policy outlines how seriously we take complaints, how we will deal with them appropriately, and how we will use them as opportunities to learn and improve for the future.

### 2. Alderholt Chapel's commitment

This policy applies to everyone who works on our behalf, whether they are elders, deacons, senior leaders, ministry leaders, paid staff, volunteers, or others. It is designed to be clear, transparent, and easy for anyone wishing to make a complaint.

The existence of our complaints policy and procedure is publicised on our website and in our Church Handbook so that people know who to contact and how to make a complaint.

We will ensure everyone at Alderholt Chapel knows to whom they should pass a complaint, and that all complaints are investigated fairly and in a timely way, following the policies and processes laid out here.

Any investigation of the concerns must be extremely mindful of any conflict of interest. In this context, a conflict of interest includes 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 an allegation is levelled against the eldership as a whole, one of the elders cannot investigate it. Also, if the complaint is around a particular area of ministry, it cannot be investigated by someone also involved in that ministry area.

Any person(s) appointed to investigate the complaint must have sufficient authority within Alderholt Chapel 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.

Aldersholt Chapel's Trustees will reflect on the issues brought to light through the complaints process in order to improve what we do and how we do it,

N.B. This complaints policy only covers complaints; it does not cover the raising of safeguarding concerns. Allegations of a safeguarding nature must be dealt with in accordance with our safeguarding policy and procedures.

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

As stated above, a complaint is a claim, whether justified or not, that someone has been treated unfairly, unkindly or inappropriately, or that they are dissatisfied in some way with their treatment. This can be about a person, or persons, an activity, or a group or about a ministry provided by the church.

This complaints policy outlines a three-stage complaints procedure:

- **Stage One** is included in the formal complaints' procedure but 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 the right to do so. However, the complainant must be able to demonstrate why commencing at 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** is the stage where formal processes are used which includes an investigation into the complaint.
- **Stage Three** is an appeal.

### **4. Source of complaints**

Complaints may be received through a range of channels, including phone, in person, and email. Aldersholt Chapel will establish whether the complainant wishes to commence at Stage One (informal resolution) or Stage Two (formal investigation).

### **5. Responsibility**

In the event of a complaint requiring to be addressed formally under Stage Two: Escalation and Investigation (see below), the following provisions will apply:

- Aldersholt Chapel's trustees will appoint a designated trustee to serve as "complaints handler"—the individual responsible for receiving complaints.

- On receipt of such a complaint and in consultation with the other trustees, the “complaints handler” will form a panel of three people who have not been involved in the process, normally including two representatives of the trustees (including at least one elder) and another spiritually mature member of the congregation.
- The management and oversight for this policy and its implementation rests with the board of trustees of Alderholt Chapel.
- In the event that the complaint involves the “complaints handler”, the complainant should approach another member of the trustees.
- In the event that the complaint involves the eldership as a whole, the complainant should approach the deacons ([deacons@alderholtchapel.org](mailto:deacons@alderholtchapel.org)) who will agree with the complainant who would constitute a suitable third party to hear their complaint. Such a third party could include:
  - three mature members of Alderholt Chapel; or
  - the EFCC; or
  - a trusted local pastor who can gather a panel to support him.
- In this event, the third party will agree to consider the complaint in accordance with the terms of this policy. One of the appointed "third party" will assume the role of "complaints handler" for the complaint in accordance with this policy.

## 6. Receiving Complaints

We want to ensure that we fully understand each complaint. The church therefore has a specific form for recording complaints and ideally, they should be raised using the specified form contained within this document. If, however, the church receives a written complaint which is not on the correct form, the designated “complaints handler” will ensure that all the information required by the form has been gathered.

Where a verbal complaint is received, the “complaints handler” will:

1. complete the complaint form, normally within 48 hours of receipt of the complaint;
2. record 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. record the relationship of the complainant to **Alderholt Chapel** (for example: attendee, member, parent);
5. pass the complainant a copy of the User’s Guide so that they understand the process that will be followed;
6. advise the complainant what will happen next and how long it is likely to take;
7. confirm with the complainant that the record accurately reflects the conversations that took place and that it captures adequately the concerns they are raising; and
8. establish with the complainant the desired outcome of their complaint (e.g. an apology, some other form of restoration or actions they wish to see taken such as changes to our policies or procedures, etc.).

## 7. Practical Guidance for Handling Verbal Complaints

The complaints handler should...

- remain calm and respectful throughout the conversation;
- listen carefully, allowing the person to talk about the complaint in their own words.  
Sometimes a person just wants to “let off steam”;
- refrain from debating 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 they have understood the complaint by reflecting what they have noted down;
- acknowledge the person’s feelings (even if you feel that they are being unreasonable). They can do this without making a comment on the complaint itself or making any admission of fault on behalf of the church. For instance,
  - “I understand that this situation is difficult.”
  - “We hope to be able to come to a swift conclusion”;
- apologise if they feel that an apology is deserved for something that was the church’s responsibility;
- ask the complainant what they would like to see done to resolve the issue;
- be clear about what they can do, how long it will take, and what it will involve;
- not promise things they cannot deliver;
- give clear and valid reasons why unreasonable requests cannot be met;
- make sure that the person understands what they have been told; and
- wherever appropriate, inform the person about the available avenues of review or appeal.

## 8. Formal acknowledgement

The complaints handler should issue a formal acknowledgment of receipt of the complaint to the complainant within 7 days.

## 9. Plan Response

A decision needs to be made about the nature of the complaint and how it will be handled. This decision, taken by the complaints handler in consultation with the trustees, will consider such factors as:

- Has the threshold for reporting to statutory services been met?
- Has the threshold for any regulatory reporting been met?
- Has the threshold for an internal investigation been met and if so...
  - who will be involved in the investigation panel?
  - how will we seek to resolve this?
  - by when?

## 10. Communicate Response

Once the planned actions in Point 9 above have been agreed, then the complaints handler will:

- communicate the process to the complainant; and
- tell them who is their point of contact.

## Alderholt Chapel

### Procedures – Resolving Complaints

#### Stage One: Informal Resolution

Wherever possible, the preference for **Alderholt Chapel** is to follow the Scriptural principles for reconciling differences (e.g. Matthew 18). 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 trustees of the church. This would 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 should be followed.

If the complainant does not wish to escalate, the trustees should consider whether there are outstanding issues that they need to consider. It is possible that the complainant does not wish to escalate for a variety of legitimate reasons. However, the issues that have been raised may be of concern to the church and so the trustees may wish to continue to address them 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 trustees designated to serve as "complaints handler".

If the complainant feels that the issue has not been satisfactorily resolved at Stage One, they must formally notify the designated complaints handler 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 agreed between the complaints handler and the complainant. However, this extension must be requested within the 14-day period.

- The complainant must set out in writing the details of the complaint including supporting evidence.
- The designated complaints handler will provide written acknowledgement of receipt of a request for Stage 2 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.
- In consultation with the trustees, the complaints handler will appoint a panel to investigate the complaint and define the scope and process of the investigation.
- The panel will notify the complainant in writing of the investigation process and anticipated timeframes.
- If the complaint relates to a specific person/s, they should be informed and assured that they will be given opportunity to respond.
- Written notes of interviews must 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 trustees or the deacons if the complaint is against all the elders. This appeal should be lodged within 28 days of receipt of the outcome, unless the complaint involves the eldership as a whole and has been heard already under Stage 2 by an independent third party. In this case, there is no appeal.

In all other cases:

- 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 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 2 complaint to establish whether any further investigation is required; and
  - make a final decision on the robustness and reliability of the Stage 2 process and findings, once any necessary inquiries/investigations are complete.
- The outcome of the appeal should be reported back to the panel who will sign off the appeal.
- The complainant will then be notified of the outcome and of any options to raise the concerns further. These would include:
  - a) a complaint or a referral to the charity commission, or
  - b) statutory services if they believe those thresholds were met.
- The decision taken at this stage is final.

## Vexatious Complaints

If the trustees 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 church 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 must be handled sensitively and confidentially. Information concerning the complaint should only be shared on a need-to-know basis. Share only with those who need to know the information and ensure that you are following any relevant data protection procedures or GDPR requirements.

## Appendix 1—Alderholt Chapel Complaints Form

### Your details

Name:

Address:

Phone:

Email:

If anyone else is involved in raising this complaint or you are raising the complaint on behalf of someone else, please give details:

### About the complaint

Date(s):

Person(s) involved:

Complaint about: (please clearly describe the nature of your complaint)

Supporting information:

- *State the matter or name of the person who is the subject of the complaint.*
- *What happened, when and where.*
- *Provide the contact details or statements of any witnesses.*
- *If complaining about a decision, explain what the decision was about, when it was taken, and who made it.*
  - *Explain what impact this decision has had, or you may fear will have, and upon whom.*
- *Provide any additional information that you believe would be helpful.*

### Q1. Have you tried to resolve this matter informally? YES/NO

*If YES, please move to Q2.*

*If NO, please explain briefly why you decided not to try to resolve the matter informally, then move to Q3.*

## **Q2. If you tried to resolve this matter informally, what happened?**

*State who you dealt with, when and where, what information you provided to them, and what you felt was unsatisfactory about the outcome.* Q3. What actions are you wanting the church to take and what outcomes are you seeking?

*Whilst the trustees cannot promise to do what you ask, it would be helpful to understand what resolution you are seeking.*

The church will treat your data carefully and in accordance with the church's data protection policy **[insert link to church data protection policy]**. The church cannot guarantee to keep the fact and details of your complaint confidential if it is necessary and proportionate to share your data to review and resolve your complaint.

**Signature of complainant:**

**Date:**

## Appendix 2--Complaint Acknowledgement Letter Template

[Date]

Dear [insert name],

Thank you for your [letter / email] to [Alderholt Chapel or name of specific person] dated [insert date].

We are sorry that you have had to raise a complaint [include a brief summary of complaint].

The Church, acting through our trustees, will review your complaint in accordance with our complaints policy [insert link].

[Insert the name of the responsible person(s)] will be in touch with you within 7 days to begin a review of your complaint.

The Church will treat the facts and content of your complaint carefully and in line with our data protection policy [insert link to church data protection policy]. However, on occasion the Church may need to make a public statement about the subject matter of the complaint or to report the matter to the statutory authorities and consequently the church cannot guarantee to keep the fact of or details of your complaint confidential. Where this may be necessary, you will be kept informed.

You should maintain reasonable confidentiality as to the nature and content of your complaint, other than to seek professional advice if required, and now that you have submitted your complaint, you should avoid communicating with the person complained about while the matter is being reviewed.

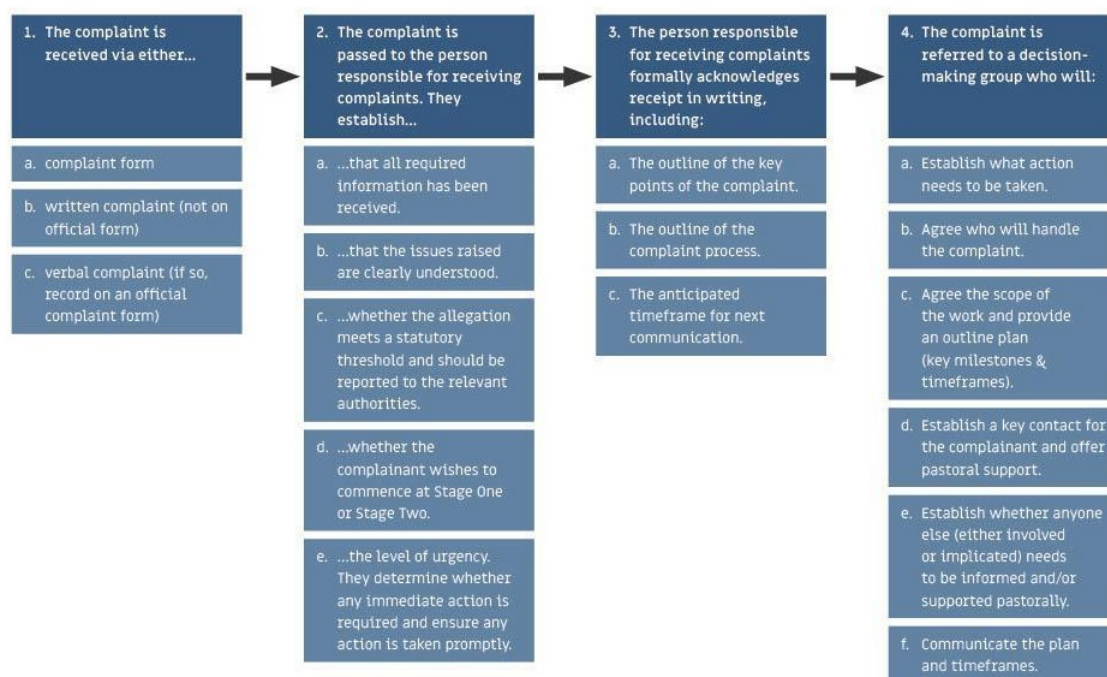
If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact [insert name/email] in writing.

Yours sincerely,

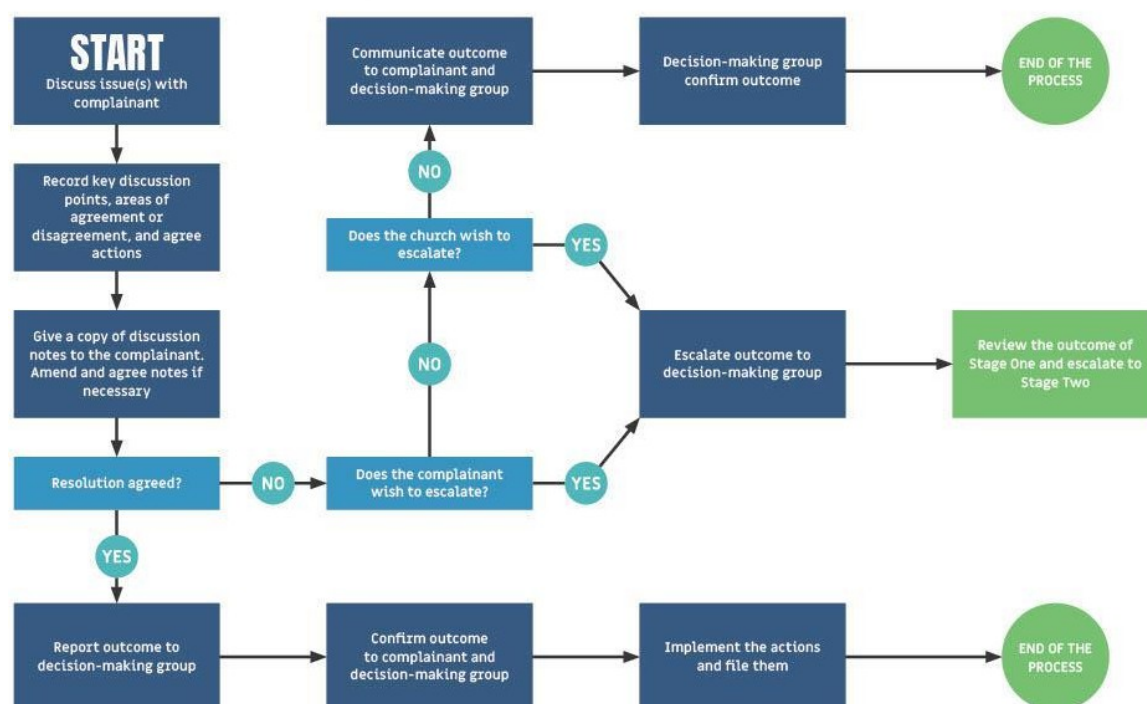
[Name and signature]

## Appendix 3—Complaints Policy Flow Chart

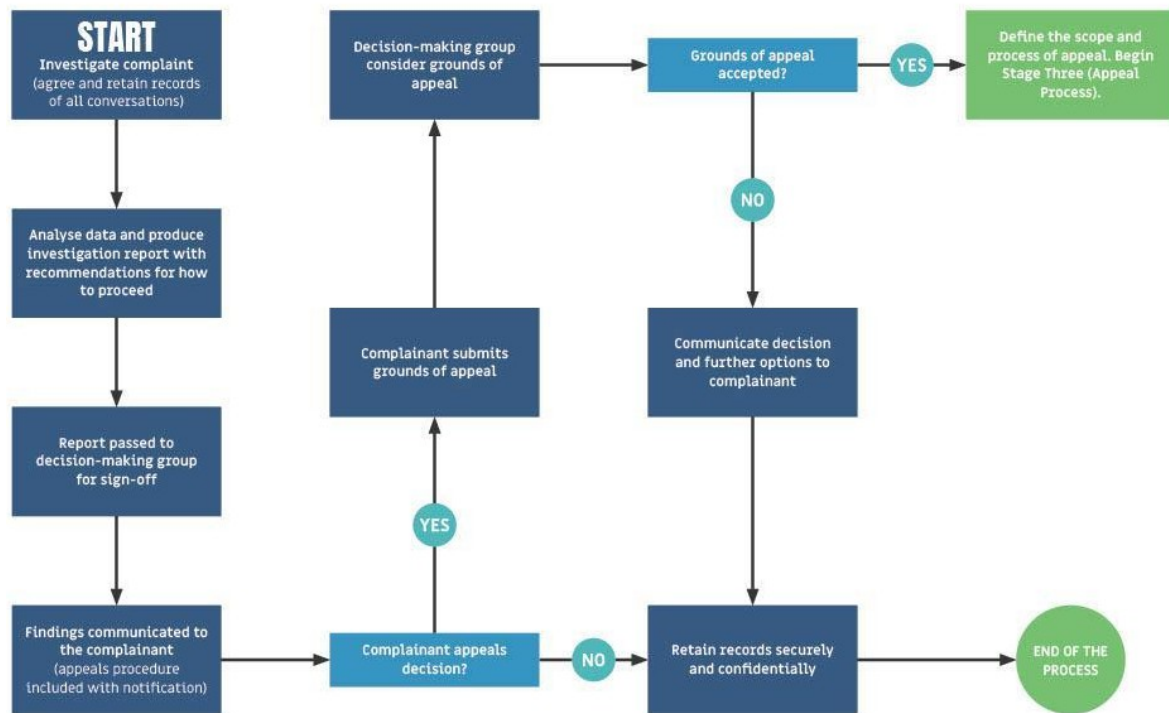
### COMPLAINTS PROCESS - ON RECEIVING A COMPLAINT



### STAGE ONE : INFORMAL RESOLUTION



## STAGE TWO : ESCALATION AND INVESTIGATION PROCESS



## STAGE THREE : APPEAL PROCESS



