



# Resolving Complaints: a User's Guide

This document outlines a policy we hope you will never need to use. However, in a fallen world we are both sinners and sufferers, fragile and fallen. We are people who both hurt others and are hurt by others.

Wherever possible, we would encourage you to follow the Scriptural principles for reconciling differences (e.g. Matthew 18 and 1 Timothy 5). However, sometimes attempts to resolve an issue informally may fail or may not even be appropriate. This complaints procedure, which forms part of a more detailed document which is available from the trustees, helps you to know what to do in that situation.

## Stage One: Informal Resolution

We hope that during this stage, at Stage One, most complaints can be resolved by talking, praying and achieving a shared understanding of the issues involved.

We would normally advise you to meet or speak with the elders to try to resolve your concerns at this initial, informal stage. We will take care to ensure that the environment is conducive to constructive discussion.

We will offer pastoral support to you and any other party involved and you will always be encouraged to bring along a friend to support you should you wish to.

Please note, this procedure does not prevent issues being discussed over multiple meetings if this proves to be helpful.

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

- **Resolved:** agreement has been reached and any follow up actions clearly agreed, including timeframes for the actions and how completion will be communicated to you.
- **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 you and a further copy for the church's own records. You 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, you will be asked whether you wish to escalate the matter to Stage Two. If so, the procedure detailed below will be followed.

If you don't wish to escalate, the trustees should consider whether there are outstanding issues that they need to consider. It is possible that you don't wish to escalate for a variety of legitimate reasons, but issues may have been raised that are of concern to the church and so the trustees 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 you wish to bypass Stage One, your complaint should be addressed to the trustee designated to serve as "complaints handler"—the individual responsible for receiving complaints.

- In the event that the complaint involves the designated "complaints handler", you should approach another member of the trustees who will serve as the "complaints handler" in your case.
- In the event that the complaint involves the eldership as a whole, you should approach the deacons ([deacons@alderholtchapel.org](mailto:deacons@alderholtchapel.org)) who will agree with you who will constitute a suitable third party to hear your complaint in accordance with this procedure. 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 serve alongside him.

If you feel that the issue has not been satisfactorily resolved at Stage One, you should formally notify the appropriate "complaints handler" within 14 days—as above. You will need to clearly indicate the nature of your 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 with you. However, this extension must be requested within the 14-day period.

- You must set out in writing the details of the complaint including supporting evidence.
- The designated complaints handler will provide written acknowledgement of receipt of your 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 you and to anyone else concerned.
- In consultation with the trustees, the designated complaints handler will appoint a panel to investigate your complaint and will define the scope and process of the investigation.
- The panel will then notify you in writing of the investigation process and anticipated timeframes.
- If the complaint relates to a specific person, the panel should inform them, assure them that they will be given opportunity to respond and also keep them informed at all stages of the investigation and of the outcome.
- Written notes of interviews must be taken and held securely.
- If there are delays to the timeframe, a progress report should be sent to you as soon as possible with an indication of when a full response will be complete.
- Whether the complaint is upheld or not, the reply to you 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 you are still dissatisfied with the process or the outcome of the investigation, you can appeal the decision in writing to the trustees, or to 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:

- Your appeal must clearly state the reasons for the appeal and provide evidence as to why you disagree with the outcome of the investigation.
- The trustees, 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.
  - Once any necessary inquiries/investigations are complete, make a final decision on the robustness and reliability of the Stage 2 process and its findings.
- You 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 to
  - b) statutory services if you 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 due processes have been exhausted) the church may consider exercising church discipline if you are a member. If you are 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 your complaint will only be shared on a need-to-know basis, following any relevant data protection procedures or GDPR requirements.