

# Complaint Handling System

The club's policy for complaint handling is described in pages one to five. A short guide for members wishing to make a complaint is at page six. A short guide for club officers receiving a complaint is at page seven.

## 1. Introduction

The Club's complaint handling process is being reviewed. There are many models for effective complaint handling, and the model chosen must suit the work, structure and size of the organisation and the needs of clients. This draft outlining the proposed complaint handling system is for consultation and draws on the *Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling* (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2009). While the *Guide* is targeted at Commonwealth agencies, it provides a useful foundation to build on for our club.

The club's complaint handling process also needs to align with Section 65B "Dispute resolution procedure" of the *Associations Incorporation Act 1991* (attachment A).

The overarching approach needs to cover the possible wide range of types of complaints. A guiding principle is that complaints should be handled in a way that is proportionate and appropriate to the matter being complained about. For example, straightforward incidents at the lodge can be dealt with by the Lodge Leader or Lodge Manager soon after the incident occurs while other problems may need to be escalated.

Under the roles and responsibilities of the club's committee, the Vice President (VP) Management has overarching responsibility for complaint handling.

## 2. Culture

An effective complaint handling system will benefit the club's reputation and administration.

- Discover and address weaknesses in the club's policies, procedures or operation.
- Reassure members that the committee is committed to resolving problems and improving relations and members' enjoyment.
- Improve future decision making.
- Enhance the committee's accountability and transparency.

## 3. Principles

The *Guide* highlights a number of principles that underlie a complaint handling system, including fairness, accessibility, responsiveness, efficiency and integration.

### 3.1 Fairness

A complaint must be treated fairly. Fairness rests on three qualities – impartiality, confidentiality and transparency.

- **Impartiality** is vital to the credibility and success of a complaint handling system. A complaint should be treated on its merits. There should be a full and objective evaluation of the facts or evidence provided in support of a complaint. A complainant should not be victimised.
- **Confidentiality** and privacy should be respected. Personal details might need to be disclosed for one purpose (in consultation with the complainant, to improve the investigation) but might need protection in other situations (for example, public reporting on complaint incidents and trends). The *Guide* notes, “it is generally good practice to accept anonymous complaints, even though it can be difficult to conduct a full investigation without knowing the identity of a complainant. This should be explained to the complainant, and they should be asked how they want to be advised of the outcome of an investigation.”
- To promote **transparency**, complainants should be advised early about the steps in the process and the expected timeline for handling the complaint. If a complaint is not resolved promptly a progress update will be provided. The outcome of an investigation will be explained and, if applicable, reasons provided if the evidence presented by the complainant is not accepted. The complainant will be given an opportunity to respond or to seek an internal review if they are not satisfied with the decision made about their complaint.

### 3.2 Accessibility

The complaint handling system should be accessible to members and associates. To increase **awareness**, complaint handling documents should be prominently placed on the club’s website.

To ensure effective **access** a complaint can be made by various means such as a letter, email, phone call or face-to-face contact. A complaint can be made to the Lodge Leader, Lodge Manager, the VP of the lodge, VP Management or other committee members, the Administration Manager or Information Officer. If you wish to discuss your complaint with VP Management, email ([vp.management@brindabellaskiclub.org.au](mailto:vp.management@brindabellaskiclub.org.au)) to organise a phone call.

The *Guide* notes that although some complaints cannot be fully investigated without being put into writing or being supported by other documents, it is important not to make this a barrier to complaining.

### 3.3 Responsiveness

Any club officer receiving a complaint should be mindful to be responsive to the needs of complainants. Apart from timelines (mentioned earlier), examples of these issues could be a complainant from a non-English speaking background or the emotional toll in making some types of complaints.

### **3.4 Efficiency**

A complaint handling system should be efficient. Methods of dealing with a complaint will differ from one complaint to another. Simple complaints should usually be resolved quickly after the first interaction with a club contact. More complex or sensitive matters may take longer to resolve. Depending on the significance/complexity/sensitivity of the complaint, a sub-committee might be formed which would include the President.

As mentioned earlier, complaints should be handled in a way that is proportionate and appropriate to the matter being complained about.

### **3.5 Integration**

The committee aims to integrate the complaint system with its other activities to identify weaknesses and lead to improvements. An on-going record of complaints will be kept by the committee, mindful of confidentiality and privacy. VP Management will report on complaints and complaint trends as a regular agenda item at monthly committee meetings.

## **4. Process**

In the *Guide*, the Ombudsman recommends seven steps to provide an effective complaint handling process – acknowledge, assess, plan, investigate, respond, follow up, and consider.

### **4.1 Acknowledgement**

Acknowledge the complaint quickly so as to reassure the member (or associate) that their complaint is receiving attention. Outline the complaint process and (as appropriate) provide club contact details.

### **4.2 Assessment**

The nature of complaints may differ widely. The subject of a complaint might be apparent from the information a complainant provides, or a lengthy investigation might be needed to clarify the facts. Some complaints can be resolved by means of an explanation or apology while others seek reconsideration of a decision or policy.

The *Guide* notes that “it is good practice to ask the client how they would like to see their complaint resolved – what outcome they are seeking. Sometimes an agency can meet the client’s expectations and sometimes not, but it is important to take account of those expectations. Often what the complainant is seeking will be straightforward – for example, an apology... In other cases the complainant might have an altruistic purpose, such as a desire to raise awareness of the problem or to ensure that other people will not find themselves in the same situation.”

### **4.3 Planning**

As noted, complaints that are straightforward can often be resolved on first contact. If this is not the case and the complaint requires an investigation, a short written plan should be prepared. The plan should:

- define what is being investigated;

- list the steps involved and if further information is required and from who;
- identify the remedy the complainant is seeking, whether expectations are realistic or need management, and other possible remedies;
- note any special considerations such as identity withheld from others, sensitive or confidential information that needs to be safeguarded.

#### **4.4 Investigation**

The three principles of fair investigation are outlined in section 3.1. Each complaint should be approached with an open mind. A written record should be kept of evidence that is orally provided. A complainant may be asked to assist the investigation by providing documents they have or provide further explanation, clarification or information and if there are witnesses.

A complainant should be given the opportunity to comment on contrary information or claims from another source before a decision is made to dismiss the complaint.

#### **4.5 Response**

When the investigation of a complaint is completed the complainant should be told the particulars of the investigation, including any findings or decision reached. Whether the explanation should be given orally or in writing, or in both ways, will depend on the circumstances. If the complainant is not satisfied with the findings or decision their options should be explained in seeking an internal review.

It may not always be possible to resolve each disputed matter. The evidence to the investigator might be scant or inconclusive, and this should be explained to the complainant. Thought should be given on how to reach a settlement or understanding between the complainant and those being complained about.

The Club Rules (item 12) allow the committee to discipline members.

#### **4.6 Following up**

It is good practice to offer complainants the opportunity to comment on how their complaint was handled and resolved.

#### **4.7 Systemic issues**

The person's complaint might point to a systemic problem in the club which could be repeated. A related review of the club's procedures and policies may be required.

### **5. Analysis**

Complaints can provide a source of information about how well the club is performing and what improvements might be made. The *Guide* notes that good records should be kept and the information regularly analysed. Reports on complaints should include: the number of complaints about a particular matter, any spikes in complaints, characteristics and frequency of a problem.

The *Guide* also notes that in relation to privacy legislation, access to the complaints database should be restricted to authorised staff. Except to the extent necessary, a

complainant's identity or personal details should not be disclosed to other staff. For our club access could be limited to the President, Secretary and VP Management.

Numerous ongoing complaints about the same thing are usually a sign of a systemic or recurrent problem that requires further investigation and possible action by the committee. VP Management will analyse records and report to the committee as appropriate or at least annually. A short report may be included in *Christie*.

## Attachment A

Section 65B 'Dispute resolution procedure' of the Act

The rule of an incorporated association must set out a dispute resolution procedure for dealing with any dispute under the *Associations Incorporation Act 1991* or the rules between (a) a member and another member; or (b) a member and the association.

A member may appoint any person to act on behalf of the member in the dispute resolution procedure.

In applying the dispute resolution procedure, the association must ensure that —

- (a) each party to the dispute has been given an opportunity to be heard on the matter which is the subject of the dispute; and
- (b) the outcome of the dispute is determined by an unbiased decision-maker; and
- (c) the decision-maker notifies each party to the dispute, in writing, about the decision and gives reasons for the decision; and
- (d) to the extent that doing so is compatible with paragraphs (a) to (c), the dispute resolution procedure is completed as soon as is reasonably practicable; and
- (e) the dispute resolution procedure includes an appeal process.

If a member has initiated a dispute resolution procedure in relation to a dispute between a member and the association, the association must not take disciplinary action against any of the following people in relation to the matter which is the subject of the dispute resolution procedure until the dispute resolution procedure has been completed:

- (a) the member who initiated the dispute resolution procedure (complainant member);
- (b) a member of the association appointed by the complainant member under section (2) to act on behalf of the complainant member in the dispute resolution procedure.

# Guide on how members can make a complaint

## Introduction

This short guide is to help members who wish to make a complaint. The guide is based on the overarching document *Complaint Handling System* published on the club's website, which you should also read.

The club aims to handle complaints in a way that is proportionate and appropriate to the matter being complained about.

The club aims to deal with your complaint promptly.

If you have a simple or straightforward complaint at the lodge, the Lodge Manager or Lodge Leader may be able to deal with it at the time. However, if your complaint is more complex or sensitive you can contact a committee member. The VP Management has primary responsibility for handling complaints ([vp.management@brindabellaskiclub.org.au](mailto:vp.management@brindabellaskiclub.org.au)).

## General guidance

Make sure you provide enough information to the club official so their job in resolving the complaint is easier.

What is the exact nature of your complaint? Were there any witnesses (if applicable)?

How would you like to see your complaint resolved (eg an explanation or apology)?

Provide your contact details (name, email address, phone number).

Are there any confidentiality or sensitive issues? Anonymous complaints will be accepted but that might make the investigation difficult. How then do you want to be advised of the outcome of the investigation?

If you wish to discuss your complaint with VP Management, email ([vp.management@brindabellaskiclub.org.au](mailto:vp.management@brindabellaskiclub.org.au)) to organise a phone call.

## Next steps

If your complaint needs to be escalated, a committee member will contact you to acknowledge that your complaint is receiving attention and to seek more information or clarification if required.

The committee member will let you know the particulars of the investigation, including any findings or decisions. However, if there are contrary information or claims made during the investigation you will be given an opportunity to comment before a decision is made.

## All complaints will be recorded

All complaints are recorded so the committee knows what annoys members, how they were investigated and resolved, and to ensure there are no ongoing or systemic issues. The committee will be mindful of privacy issues and access to complaint records will be limited to only a few committee members.

# Guide on handling complaints for Lodge Managers, Lodge Leaders and VPs of lodges

## Introduction

This short guide is to help you remember some of the key points in handling a complaint. The guide is based on the overarching document *Complaint Handling System* published on the club's website.

Complaints should be handled in a way that is proportionate and appropriate to the matter being complained about.

When receiving the complaint try to deal with it promptly. If you are unable to deal with it or you think the issue should be escalated, let the member know their complaint will be sent to a committee member, most likely VP Management.

## General questions to ask

Make sure you have enough information. Obviously, this will be important if the complaint is passed to a committee member to make their job easier in resolving the complaint.

What is the exact nature of the complaint? Were there any witnesses (if applicable)?

How would they like to see their complaint resolved (eg. an explanation or apology)? Is the outcome they are seeking reasonable?

Obtain their contact details (name, email address, phone number).

Are there any confidentiality or sensitive issues? Anonymous complaints will be accepted but let the member know it might make the investigation difficult. How then do they want to be advised of the outcome of the investigation?

## Next steps

If escalated, let them know that a committee member will contact them to acknowledge their complaint is receiving attention and to seek more information or clarification if required.

A committee member will let them know the particulars of the investigation, including any findings or decisions. Before a decision is made, the member will be given the opportunity to comment if there are contrary information or claims.

## Specific examples

If the complaint is about 'room not clean', ask for the details about what was not clean and make sure no one else has been in the room. Other common examples are; not cleaning up after cooking, not completing a lodge job, late night or early morning noise, unruly children or adults leaving a mess in common areas, leaving gear all over the drying room or common areas, car park issues at Thredbo, room allocation, inappropriate behaviour/comments by an intoxicated member.

## Report all complaints

You should let the VP Management know about all complaints including the ones you dealt with. All complaints are recorded so the committee knows what annoys members, how they were investigated and resolved, and to ensure there are no ongoing or systemic issues.