



Establishing a model Complaints Policy and Procedure for Area Meetings

Why have a complaints procedure?

Quaker Stewardship Committee saw the need to offer a model complaints procedure for area meetings, for several reasons:

- Using a clear, fair procedure can reduce the time and energy spent on some types of complaints, can aid resolution, and reduce the negative effects when complaints stay unresolved.
- A number of AMs have got into difficulties handling difficult complaints without a procedure. There can be a lack of clear responsibility and clear steps, leading to confusion, delay, and a lack of resolution or conclusion. One AM trustee body has been known to decline to respond to a complaint, seeing it as outside their remit.
- Quakers and non-Quakers may expect area and local meetings to have a complaints procedure.
- The Charity Commission certainly expects each charity to have one.
- It appears very few area meetings (AMs) do.
- There seems to be a gap between what *Quaker faith & practice (Qf&p)* advises and what charities are expected to do.
- Section 4.25 of *Qf&p* about appeals is now limited to membership terminations.

Do we really need a procedure like this?

The procedure will probably be used rarely in any particular meeting, perhaps only once in a few years. But sometimes you really need a clear process, with clear responsibilities. Otherwise a complaint can rumble on, without anyone handling it well, and without a resolution or an end point.

Which sources have been used?

Model and actual complaints policies and procedures have been consulted, including the National Council of Voluntary Organisations, Directory of Social Change, Citizens Advice, and the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman. Procedures adopted by Leeds, Staffordshire, Northumbria and Mid Somerset area meetings have been reviewed, along with BYM's own procedure, and the relevant sections of *Qf&p*.

Which principles have been followed?

- The procedure speaks to the complainant (not the person responding), in simple language, and is simple and clear.
- It is designed to cope with different types of complaints – simple or complex, internal to Quakers or from external people, by correspondence or with a meeting or panel.
- It aims to sit well with established Quaker processes, including relevant sections of *Qf&p*, and the role of elders and overseers, as well as expectations of charities.
- It allows for different people to handle the complaint (including elders or overseers) depending on its nature or the people available.
- It encourages informal resolution, and a range of methods. Even when a formal complaint has been submitted, there is scope to use informal resolution and the role of elders and overseers.
- There should be a clear appeal stage. Further appeals should not follow.
- The procedure needs to be fair, and sufficiently robust to withstand complaints about the procedure itself – hence the potential use of a panel for an appeal.
- The stages for formal complaints have commonly used labels: Informal problem solving; Formal Stage 1; Formal Stage 2 (Appeal).
- Quakers are not trying to use the complaints process as a source of feedback on the quality of a service. So our process is not designed for this. However, there is an expectation that we learn from complaints.

Explanations and possible variations

- a) The **quotes from *Quaker faith & practice*** might be considered too long for a simple procedure. However, some who want to complain will have little understanding of Quaker approaches. Putting these in a prominent place like this informs or reminds the reader that we are first and foremost a Quaker community.
- b) Area meetings can decide which **role-holders** to insert in the formal sections, if they wish. The advantage of using clerks is that they are the point of contact for other correspondence, and easily identifiable to a complainant. The procedure gives the option for the clerk to ask another Quaker to play their role from then onwards. This is to help with conflicts of interest, and to avoid overburdening a clerk. It also enables an elder or overseer to be directly involved in running the formal procedure which may be useful for some complaints.
- c) Complaints about “**relationships with other Friends, arrangements for worship and related matters**” are included within the procedure. To exclude them would give no recourse to any formal process or appeal for this type of complaint. If the informal processes and elder/overseer led processes are used well, then using the formal process should be rare. But if they do arise, having a clearly structured process will help towards a resolution.

- d) If an area meeting **provides a service**, for example a conference facility or a refugee support service, then a separate complaints procedure would be needed, and referred to in section 2.
- e) Having a **face to face meeting** in Stage 1, and a **panel** in Stage 2, are both deliberately shown as optional, as are having a second person as a witness and signing records of a meeting. Some organisations' procedures make these compulsory with every complaint. That seems unnecessarily inflexible, could be burdensome or inappropriate for some types of complaint. So they are there to be considered, depending on the circumstances.
- f) Some things which appear in other model complaints documents are not included here:
- **Time limits for acknowledging complaints.** This seem likely to be problematic for an organisation where clerks are volunteers. In fact, there are no references to acknowledgements. An area meeting could decide to insert the requirement to acknowledge within say 10 days, and could explain that clerks are volunteers.
 - **Annual reporting by trustees on complaints and the learning from them.** This may well be impractical, unpopular, and not particularly helpful for a very small volumes of formal complaints.
 - **The potential to take a complaint to the Charity Commission, or OSCR in Scotland.** This seems unnecessary and unhelpful.
 - **Vexatious complaints.** A few complaints procedures specify how to handle vexatious complaints. For example, a model complaints procedure for parish councils (the local council below a district council) spends half of its text on vexatious complaints. This does not seem necessary for our procedure. If an area meeting does wish to cover vexatious complaints, it could add this: "If a complaint appears to be vexatious, the clerk may refer this to trustees for a decision on how to proceed, which can include ending the complaints procedure".
 - **Contact details for the clerks.** This seems unlikely to be kept up to date, as an area meeting document. Meetings could choose to add this as a final page, and refer to it in the text. This could just take the form of the postal and email addresses of each meeting.

Feedback and experience

Your comments, feedback, experience and agreed documents would be welcome, to supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk.

February 2021