

# General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

## Complaints Policy and Procedure

### 1. Introduction

The General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches (“GA”) is a provider of specific services to a range of individuals and groups. The GA is committed to dealing with all complaints about the services it provides constructively, impartially and effectively. The GA will make every effort to ensure that all complaints receive a complete, accurate and timely response.

### 2. Values

This policy is underpinned by the values of the GA and its members; particularly the recognition of the worth and dignity of all people set out in as part of the Preamble to the Constitution. The GA is therefore committed to respecting all its service users through the provision of the best possible services. The GA is willing to learn when things go wrong in order to prevent a recurrence. A respectful and effective handling of complaints will maintain the good relationships upon which the GA depends.

### 3. What it covers

The GA defines a complaint as follows:

“A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction about the outcome of a policy or procedure or an interaction relating to a service provided by the General Assembly”

It is recognised that criticism and complaint are not necessarily the same and that an objection to a particular GA policy or practice may be a legitimate comment requiring a respectful response but is not to be defined as a complaint. The focus is primarily on services delivered by the GA. These include, but are not limited to:

- Poor standards of performance in the delivery of a specific service
- Non-compliance with relevant laws and regulations
- Wasteful activities

### 4. Whom the policy applies to and does not

This policy sets out an approach for managing complaints about the GA and its services by members of the public and participants or service users of the services it provides. Complaints about safeguarding should be raised under the safeguarding Policy.

Members of the staff who wish to raise a complaints about a matter about which they are dissatisfied should use the Grievance Procedure. Volunteers should refer to the arrangements to support volunteers. The Policy does not apply to staff recruitment processes.

Any complaints about a Minister, Lay Pastor or Approved Lay Leader on the Rolls of the GA will be dealt with in accordance with the requirements of “Guidelines for Partnerships between Congregations and Ministers. The Policy does not apply to the ministerial training selection process.

The GA does not consider complaints relating to the internal affairs of individual congregations; who are independent charities in their own right.

## **5. Managing Complaints**

To manage complaints effectively the GA will:

- Establish and maintain a complaints procedure that is clear, confidential and easy to use.
- Make available the contact details of the Chief Officer.
- Accept complaints orally or in writing. In cases of more sensitive or serious complaints these must be made in writing.
- Every effort will be made to be sensitive to the background and individual circumstances of the complainant.
- Apply the policy to all services provided by both staff and volunteers.
- Make sure all staff and volunteers know how to recognise a complaint and how it is to be managed.
- Aim to resolve complaints informally at the point of delivery without resort to formal investigation.
- Appoint a responsible officer and an investigator(s).
- Always inform the complainant about the outcome of the complaint.
- Maintain a log of all complaints and report to the Executive Committee periodically.
- Ensure that all legal and regulatory requirements are addressed.
- The Executive Committee will appoint a member as lead for complaints who shall, however, not be involved in the operation of the Complaints Procedure.
- The Executive Committee will keep the policy and its working under review.

Under certain circumstances the GA may not be able to respond to a complaint; including where:

- The complainant has failed to identify themselves and/or provide contact details.
- All reasonable steps have already been taken to respond to the complaint.
- The complaint is not about the GA.
- The complaint is accompanied by threats of abuse of staff or volunteers.

In these situations the complainant will be informed of the decision, where possible.

The GA will maintain the confidentiality of all personal information in line with data protection legislation.

## **6. Legal Framework**

The Complaints Policy will take account of legislation such as charity law and safeguarding requirements and with the requirements of the Charity Commission.

Of particular note is the requirement to report to the Charity Commission if the requirement for reporting a serious incident has been met (i.e. represents a significant risk to beneficiaries, property, reputation or financial loss). All safeguarding incidents must be reported. In these circumstances the Chief Officer must be informed, who will take the necessary action to report the serious incident to the Charity Commission.

Approved by the GA Executive Committee on 20 July 2018

## **APPENDIX**

### **Complaints Procedure**

#### Stage 1 - Informal

The GA aims to manage complaints quickly, effectively and informally at, or close to, the first point of contact. If a staff member or volunteer can resolve a matter they should do so. If not, they should forward the complaint to the responsible individual or group for their service and at the same time inform the complainant what they have done. Most complaints are resolved locally.

#### Stage 2 - Formal

A formal complaint must be made in writing and must set out the following:

- What they are complaining about.
- When the events or actions took place.
- Why the complainant is dissatisfied.
- Details of what has been done to try and resolve the concerns.
- What the complainant considers would resolve the complaint.
- Details to others to whom the matter has been reported.
- Any additional and supporting information.
- Confirmation that the complainant is happy for the information to be provided to those who have responsibility for the matter complained about.

The complaint should be sent to the Chief Officer who, as responsible officer, will arrange for the matter to be investigated. If the complaint involves the Chief Officer another responsible officer will be appointed.

The complaint will be acknowledged by letter or email within ten working days of the complaint being received. This will outline what the GA thinks the complaint is about, written concisely and separated out into constituent parts if there is more than one issue. It will also include an outline of what the process will be, the timescales and what the complainant can expect with any right of appeal.

The appointed investigator will seek to establish the facts surrounding the complaint matching the evidence to the complaint and identify any gaps. The investigator (perhaps discussing with someone else) will decide what evidence is required to support the investigation. If there are gaps in evidence they may arrange interviews with those providing evidence, not the complainant, to fill in the gaps. If interviews are held they should be recorded with the notes being signed by both parties. The investigator should only contact the complainant to clarify any issues. Any on-going contact with the complainant should be through the responsible officer. The investigator will assess the evidence to say whether the complaint is upheld. The reasoning for this conclusion will be set out in a report which lists each part of the complaint as detailed in the acknowledgement letter/email; and sets out the findings against each part of the complaint. This should be discussed with the responsible officer who then makes a judgement. The responsible officer will respond to the complainant with the findings and outcome (upheld or not) of the investigation. Details of any appeals process will be provided. Internally there will be a review of any lessons which need learning.

A complaint should normally be dealt with within 20 working days. For more complex cases a longer timescale may be required and the complainant should be informed if this is likely to be the case.

### Stage 3 – Appeal

If the complainant is dissatisfied with the response they may ask for the complaint to be reviewed. The appeal must set out in writing the grounds of the appeal and what would satisfy the complainant. An appeal should be made within 10 days of the date of the outcome of the complaint.

### Stage 4 – External

After the GA procedure has been exhausted, complainants may refer their complaints to the Charity Commission for England and Wales.

### Vexatious Complaints

If the investigator concludes that a complaint has been made vexatiously or in bad faith the GA reserves the right to inform the complainant of the decision and the consequences.

### Confidentiality

The fact of any content of a complaint will be kept confidential in so far as it is necessary in order for the GA to properly investigate it and reach a decision relating to it unless the GA becomes aware that the complainant has not treated the matter as confidential.