



University for the Common Good

GCU Complaint Handling Procedure: Introduction and overview (Part 1)

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Foreword

Glasgow Caledonian University's Complaints Handling Procedure reflects our commitment to valuing complaints. It seeks to resolve dissatisfaction as close as possible to the point of service delivery and to conduct thorough, impartial and fair investigations of complaints so that, where appropriate, we can make evidence-based decisions on the facts of the case.

The procedure was first developed by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO) in collaboration with representatives of the Higher Education sector.

The Model Complaints Handling Procedures (MCHPs) were revised in 2019 by the SPSO in consultation with all sectors. This new edition includes a core text, which is consistent across all public services in Scotland, with some additional text and examples specific to the higher education sector. As far as is possible the SPSO has produced a standard approach to handling complaints across Scotland's public services. This procedure aims to help us 'get it right first time'. We want quicker, simpler and more streamlined complaints handling with local, early responses by capable, well-trained staff.

Complaints give the University valuable information we can use to improve. Our Complaints Handling Procedure will enable us to address a complainant's dissatisfaction and may help us prevent the same problem from happening again. For our staff, complaints provide a first-hand account of the complainants' views and experience and can highlight problems we may otherwise miss. Handled well, complaints can give our students and other members of the public a form of redress when things go wrong and can also help us continuously improve our services.

Handling complaints early creates better relations with students and other members of the public. Handling complaints close to the point of service delivery means we can deal with them locally and quickly, so they are less likely to escalate to the next stage of the procedure.

Structure of the Complaints Handling Procedure

1. This Complaints Handling Procedure (CHP) explains to staff how to handle complaints. The CHP consists of:
 - Overview and structure (part 1) - this document
 - When to use the procedure ([part 2](#)) – guidance on identifying what is and what is not a complaint, handling complex or unusual complaint circumstances, the interaction of complaints and other processes, and what to do if the CHP does not apply
 - The complaints handling process ([part 3](#)) – guidance on handling a complaint through stages 1 and 2, and dealing with post-closure contact

- Governance of the procedure ([part 4](#)) – staff roles and responsibilities and guidance on recording, reporting, publicising and learning from complaints
- The guide for complainants ([part 5](#)) – information for students and members of the public on how we handle complaints

Overview of the CHP

2. A complaint can be made either verbally or in writing, including face-to-face, by phone, letter or email.
3. We will try to resolve complaints to the satisfaction of the complainant wherever this is possible. Where this isn't possible, we will give the complainant a clear response to each of their points of complaint. We will always try to respond as quickly as we can (and on the spot where possible).
4. Our complaints procedure has two stages. We expect the majority of complaints will be handled at stage 1. If the complainant remains dissatisfied after stage 1, they can request that we look at it again, at stage 2. If the complaint is complex enough to require an investigation, we will put the complaint into stage 2 straight away and skip stage 1.
5. For detailed guidance on the process, see **Part 3: The complaints handling process**.

Complaint received
Verbally or in writing, including face-to-face, by phone, letter or email.



Stage 1: Frontline response

For issues that are straightforward and simple, requiring little or no investigation

'On-the-spot' apology, explanation, or other action to put the matter right

Complaint resolved or a response provided in **five working days** or less (unless here are exceptional circumstances)

Complaints addressed by any member of staff, or alternatively referred to the appropriate point for frontline response

Response normally face-to-face or by telephone (though sometimes we will need to put the decision in writing)

We will tell the complainant how to escalate their complaint to stage 2.

Stage 2: Investigation

Where the complainant is not satisfied with the frontline response, or refuses to engage at the frontline, or where the complaint is complex, serious or 'high-risk'

Complaint acknowledged within **three working days**

We will contact the complainant to clarify the points of complaint and outcome sought (where these are already clear, we will confirm them in the acknowledgement)

Complaint resolved or a definitive response provided within **20 working days** following a thorough investigation of the points raised

Independent external review (SPSO or other)

Where the complainant is not satisfied with the stage 2 response from the service provider

The SPSO will assess whether there is evidence of service failure or maladministration not identified by the service provider



Resolution

The complainant and Institution agree what action will be taken to resolve the complaint.

Where a complaint is resolved, it is not usually necessary to continue investigating, although an Institution may choose to do so, for example to identify learning.

We must signpost the complainant to stage 2 (for stage 1 complaints) or to the SPSO as usual.

Reporting, recording and learning

Action is taken to improve services on the basis of complaint findings, where appropriate.

We record details of all complaints, the outcome and any action taken, and use this data to analyse themes and trends.

Expected behaviours

6. We expect anyone using our Complaints Handling Procedure, to be respectful and courteous at all times.
7. We expect all staff to behave in a professional manner and treat complainants with courtesy, respect and dignity, in line with the [GCU Values and Behaviours](#). We also ask those bringing a complaint to treat our staff with respect. We ask complainants to engage actively with the complaint handling process by:
 - telling us their key issues of concern and organising any supporting information they want to give us (we understand that some complainants will require support to do this)
 - working with us to agree the key points of complaint when an investigation is required; and
 - responding in good time to reasonable requests for information.
8. Students whose conduct falls below the standards we expect whilst using the Complaints Handling Procedure may be subject to investigation under the [Code of Student Conduct](#)
9. If anyone using our Complaints Handling Procedure does not meet our expected standards for behaviour there is more on action we may take in our Unacceptable Actions Policy.
10. We recognise that people may act out of character in times of trouble or distress. Sometimes a health condition or a disability can affect how a person expresses themselves. The circumstances leading to a complaint may also result in the complainant acting in an unacceptable way.
11. People who have a history of challenging or inappropriate actions, or have difficulty expressing themselves, may still have a legitimate grievance, and we will treat all complaints seriously. However, we also recognise that the actions of some complainants may result in unreasonable demands on time and resources or unacceptable behaviour towards our staff. We will, therefore, apply our policies and procedures to protect staff from unacceptable actions such as unreasonable persistence, threats or offensive behaviour from complainants. Where we decide to restrict access to a complainant under the terms of our policy, we have a procedure in place to communicate that decision, notify the complainant of their right of appeal, and review any decision to restrict contact with us. This is outlined in our Unacceptable Actions Policy.
12. If we decide to restrict a complainant's contact, we will be careful to follow the process set out in our policy and to minimise any restrictions on the complainant's access to the complaints process. We will normally continue investigating a complaint even where contact restrictions are in place (for example, limiting communication to letter or to a

named staff member). In some cases, it may be possible to continue investigating the complaint without contact with the complainant. Our policy allows us in limited circumstances to restrict access to the complaint process entirely. This would be as a last resort, should be as limited as possible (for a limited time, or about a limited set of subjects) and requires manager approval. Where access to the complaint process is restricted, the University will signpost the complainant to the SPSO (see **Part 3: Signposting to the SPSO**).

13. The SPSO has **guidance on promoting positive behaviour and managing unacceptable actions**.
14. Glasgow Caledonian University students may wish to seek independent advice and assistance in submitting a complaint and this can be provided by the [Student Advisors in the Students' Association](#). Support may be available for non-students from [Citizen's Advice Scotland](#)

Maintaining confidentiality and data protection

15. Confidentiality is important in complaints handling. This includes maintaining the complainant's confidentiality and confidentiality in relation to information about staff members, contractors or any third parties involved in the complaint.
16. This should not prevent us from being open and transparent, as far as possible, in how we handle complaints. This includes sharing as much information with the complainant (and, where appropriate, any affected staff members) as we can. When sharing information, we should be clear about why the information is being shared and our expectations on how the recipient will use the information.
17. We must always bear in mind legal requirements, for example data protection legislation, as well as internal policies on confidentiality and the use of individuals' information. Information on data protection can be found [here](#).
18. There may be occasions where a response to a complaint may be limited by confidentiality. These examples are not exhaustive:
 - where a complaint has been raised against a staff member and has been upheld – we will advise the complainant that their complaint is upheld, but would not share specific details affecting staff members, particularly where disciplinary action is taken or being considered.
 - where someone has raised a concern about a child or an adult's safety and is unhappy about how that has been dealt with – we would look into this to check whether the safety concern had been properly dealt with, but we would not share any details of our findings in relation to the safety concern.

Recording and the use of recordings

Audio/video recording of meetings associated with the CHP are discouraged as they can undermine the scope for reaching a positive resolution. However if a complainant wishes to record a meeting, they must seek the agreement of the other party in advance. Advice on this can be sought from the Department of Governance on complaints@gcu.ac.uk For complainants with a disability requests of this nature will be considered as a reasonable adjustment in line with the Equality Act 2010.

For students, covert recording will be considered as a misconduct matter in its own right and any student found to have undertaken covert recordings may be subject to action in line with the [Code of Student Conduct](#).

The Unacceptable Actions Policy may be invoked for any non student found to have undertaken covert recording.

Covert recordings submitted as evidence to support complaints will be considered at the the discretion of the Complaint Investigator.