

Resource 3: Complaints procedure

Champions of change are active: Welcome

Why is it important to have a complaint procedure?

Having a complaint procedure sends a clear message to Board members, staff, members, volunteers and other stakeholders that your association takes issues seriously and will act on any breach of your policies or your code of conduct. An effective complaint procedure helps you to deal with complaints and issues quickly, fairly and consistently and provides management with the confidence to take action. The level of detail and type of complaint procedure you put in place is dependent on your association's size, structure and resources. It is vital that whatever type of procedure you have, people are aware of it and can easily access and understand it.

Complaint handling tips for state associations

- **Determine and outline in your policy your association's requirements and expectations regarding complaint handling.** This should include:
 - what, if any, complaints are to be referred or escalated to the national body
 - when and what decisions can be appealed to the national body
 - how the policy applies to member clubs and affiliated associations and what issues you want member clubs and affiliated associations to automatically notify you of (e.g. criminal behaviour)
 - what issues can be referred or appealed from clubs to the association.
- **Develop a flow chart** that outlines how complaints are to be handled (including who has responsibility at different stages, time frames, reference to relevant policies/constitutional clauses) and place in prominent places in the office so all staff are aware and can be quickly reminded of the appropriate process to be followed.
- **Follow your policies** and seek clarification from your national sporting organisation (or an external authority) if you are unsure about what to do.
- **Use trained member protection information officers (MPIOs)** to respond to complaints in the first instance.
- **Have succession planning** in place so that you always have enough knowledgeable and skilled people to handle complaints (including passing on/documenting corporate knowledge of useful resources, contacts, policies).
- **Try to resolve less serious complaints informally.** Many complaints at club and state sporting association level concern team matters. In the first instance, the coach or team manager should try to resolve such complaints by talking with players and/or parents. An example of a less serious complaint is a coach allegedly showing favouritism towards their own child in team selection. Complaints can also be a result of misinterpretation or misunderstanding between people. Refer to resource no. 4 for more information on dealing with conflict.
- **Some complaints may require more formal processes.** Administrative and more serious issues are usually dealt with by one or more nominated people within the association, such as a General Manager, Complaints Officer or CEO, or referred to the association's complaints tribunal. An example of a more serious issue is a player missing out on team selection because of race or religious beliefs. The person complaining should be advised that they can also seek confidential advice from federal or state anti-discrimination agencies about discrimination and harassment.
- **Seek support from your national body.** There are occasions when a SSA would benefit from the support of their national sporting organisation to deal with a complaint. Examples may be if a fair and objective process can't be guaranteed, when a decision at the SSA level has been appealed, when the issue may also involve a criminal offence or end up in court, or when the issue may reflect the sport in a bad light in the media. Whether such support is available or necessary depends on the issue and your association's and national body's constitution and policies.
- **Seek advice from other agencies.** If the issue relates to racial vilification, disability discrimination or some other form of harassment or discrimination, seek advice from relevant agencies such as migrant resource centres,

equal opportunity and human rights commissions and disability services, particularly in relation to complex communication needs.

- **Referral to an external agency is necessary for very serious issues** like suspicion of harm against a child. If a complaint involves physical or sexual assault the victim should be supported and encouraged to report the incident to the police. Your association should seek advice from and cooperate in any investigation undertaken by an external agency.
- **Make sure that a fair, just and transparent process is followed.** It is important that natural justice principles are followed throughout the entire complaint process:
 - Treat complaints seriously and act promptly.
 - Treat people fairly and listen to both sides of the story. If necessary, arrange for an interpreter.
 - Stay neutral.
 - Keep parties to the complaint informed.
 - Try to maintain confidentiality.
 - Protect against victimisation.
 - Keep accurate records.
 - Make decisions based only on information gathered, not personal views.
 - Disciplinary action should be relative to the breach.

Play by the Rules has developed an [interactive complaint handling tool](http://www.playbytherules.net.au/about-complaints/complaint-handling-tool) to help administrators understand the general principles of and processes for dealing with complaints (www.playbytherules.net.au/about-complaints/complaint-handling-tool).

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Developed in collaboration

Collaboration leader:



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