

# Hertford and Hitchin Area Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)

## Complaints Policy & Procedure

This policy and procedure covers Hertford and Hitchin Area Quaker Meeting, and its local Quaker meetings.

### Complaints Policy

We aim to:

- resolve complaints informally where possible,
- deal with your complaint seriously, promptly and in confidence,
- learn from complaints and use them to review and improve,
- use the procedure set out below.

### Complaints Procedure

#### 1. What counts as a complaint?

A complaint is a written or verbal expression of dissatisfaction about an action (or lack of action) by someone acting on behalf of the Quaker meeting, or about a decision, policy or procedure of the Quaker meeting.

#### 2. Which complaints are covered by other procedures?

In some circumstances a complaint or concern should follow another route:

- the Safeguarding Policy if it relates to an allegation that a child or a vulnerable adult has been harmed or is at risk of harm.
- the Grievance Procedure if it is made by an employee of a meeting, and should be addressed to their manager, or the Clerk of Trustees.
- for room hire, there may be a separate procedure.
- after termination of an individual's membership by a final decision of an area meeting, the procedures at 4.25 in *Quaker faith & practice* should be used.

#### 3. Informal problem-solving

We aim that complaints are resolved informally, speedily and fairly by discussion, problem solving, mediation and negotiation. Please bring any concerns or complaints directly to the person(s) responsible for the area of dissatisfaction, and hopefully they will be resolved in this way. If you think raising them directly with the person

responsible would be difficult, then do raise them with an elder or pastoral care friend who can help.

Throughout these processes, we will seek to be caring, supportive of all involved and compassionate, while being prepared to speak plainly when appropriate.

If you are not satisfied with the outcome at the informal problem-solving stage, you can then use the formal procedure in section 5.

#### **4. Amongst Quakers**

Elders and pastoral care friends have a particularly important role in maintaining the community of every Quaker meeting. This includes giving guidance on appropriate and inappropriate behaviour within meetings for worship, and also towards other people in the Quaker community. (See *Quaker faith & practice*, chapter 12.)

Complaints and concerns from members and attenders about relationships with other Friends, arrangements for worship and related matters will be addressed by elders and pastoral care friends following procedures in *Quaker faith & practice*. Again, this will mainly be by discussion, problem solving, mediation and negotiation.

Section 10.21 of *Quaker faith & practice* is useful:

There are times of conflict in every meeting when we are required to find and show the love we have for one another and to face our difficulties squarely, for it is only when we work through them, using our meeting for church affairs and other appropriate methods, that we can move forward together. Such conflict may involve a clash of personalities, a difference over the quantity or style of vocal ministry, or issues about the place where meetings for worship are held. Problems may become tangled and one sort of issue may masquerade as another. Care will be required to identify the root cause. Skill, time and great love are needed to overcome these problems, but where they have been openly faced and successfully overcome, meetings have sometimes been much richer for the experience.

The primary responsibility for finding a way to resolve these problems lies with elders and pastoral care friends. It may be that the use of a meeting for clearness (see 12.22–12.25) would offer a way forward.

Deep-seated problems are sometimes more easily resolved when an experienced facilitator from outside the situation is called on. Quaker Life or area meetings may be able to suggest Friends with an understanding of how groups and individuals interact with one another, and who are able to spend time with a meeting that has got into seemingly insoluble difficulties.

See also sections in Chapter 10 about Our Community, and Conflict.

There is also useful guidance provided on pages 293-300 of “*With a tender hand*” by Zélie Gross.

If the matter cannot be resolved at the local meeting level, the procedure at *Quaker faith & practice* 4.23 should be followed:

Area meetings are recommended to appoint a group of experienced and knowledgeable Friends who would be available to give general assistance in the amicable settlement of disputes. If help from outside the area meeting is needed, enquiry should be made of the clerk of Meeting for Sufferings, who may suggest Friends qualified to give it. Techniques of problem-solving, mediation, counselling or meetings for clearness may be appropriate in particular instances where disputants wish to mitigate the consequences of confrontation. It should be borne in mind that Friends were among the pioneers of conflict resolution as a distinct activity and have constantly sought to promote reconciliation in the wider world.

For some complaints, you or elders and pastoral care friends may think it appropriate to move to the formal procedure below.

## **5. Formal procedure for complaints**

### **5.1. Formal Stage 1**

You can make a formal complaint in writing to:

- the clerk of the local Quaker meeting,
- or for area meeting matters, the clerk of the area meeting,
- if the clerk is the person the complaint relates to, send it to the clerk of trustees.

Throughout this procedure, the relevant clerk will either handle it themselves, or ask another Quaker to take their place in this procedure, such as an elder, pastoral care friend or trustee, depending on the nature of the complaint.

When complaining, please tell us:

- As much as you can about the complaint
- What has gone wrong
- How you want us to resolve the matter.
- How much you want this to be kept confidential.
- Your name, address, telephone number and email address
- That you want this treated as a formal complaint.

You can ask someone to help you write this. It is not always possible to keep a complaint confidential, though it may be possible to remove your name.

It may be that using the processes in sections 3 and 4 would be most appropriate to resolve the issues, particularly amongst Quakers. If so, the clerk will initiate this, and you will also receive a written response once the process is concluded.

Otherwise the complaint will continue as follows. The clerk will contact you and establish the facts of the complaint. If there is a meeting, you can be represented or accompanied by a friend or other supporter. The clerk will then give the facts to the person the complaint relates to, and seek their response. If there is a meeting, they can also be represented or accompanied by a friend or other supporter. In some situations the clerk may find it useful to have another person with them in these meetings, and to make a written record, which each party may be asked to agree. The clerk may then contact other relevant people.

The clerk will draw conclusions and let you and the person the complaint relates to know the outcome, ideally within three weeks of the formal complaint being made. If there is a delay, they will keep you informed of progress.

The clerk will keep notes of the discussions and the outcome. See also Section 6.

## **5.2. Formal Stage 2 - Appeal**

If the outcome at Stage 1 does not resolve the complaint satisfactorily, you can appeal in writing to the clerk of trustees, explaining why.

The clerk of trustees may handle the matter themselves, or ask another Quaker to take their place in this procedure, such as the assistant clerk of trustees or area meeting clerk, perhaps if the matter relates to a decision by trustees. If another Quaker or a panel is handling the appeal, they will keep the clerk of trustees informed on issues relating to trustees' responsibilities, for example reputational or legal issues.

They will review the complaint, in consultation with appropriate Quakers if required. They will check that the fundamental point of the complaint has been addressed and will respond to any outstanding issues.

They may decide to form a panel, usually of three people chosen from trustees, elders or pastoral care friends who have not been involved in the process before, and could include people from another area meeting. The panel will establish why you still feel dissatisfied, and receive any documentation from Stage 1. The panel will normally meet with you and your supporter, the person the complaint relates to and their supporter, and the clerk who undertook Stage 1. Other people may be asked to contribute. The panel members will then meet separately to make a decision about the complaint.

The clerk of trustees, or the convenor of the panel if one is used, will let you and the person the complaint relates to know the outcome of the appeal, ideally within a month of the appeal being made. If there is a delay, they will keep you informed of

progress. Notes of the discussions and outcome will be kept, held by the clerk of trustees.

The decision of the clerk of trustees, or the panel if used, will be final. There is no further stage of appeal.

## **6. After conclusion**

If the complaint relates to an employee, it may be necessary to then address the matter through the disciplinary procedure.

The clerk (Stage 1), and clerk of trustees (Stage 2), or the person/panel playing their role, are invited to make recommendations to improve the situation for the future.

A meeting of trustees (or a sub-committee) will record in a minute the existence of the formal complaint, the outcome, and the actions taken as a result. This will respect the confidentiality sought by the complainant as far as possible.

Learning from the complaint, whether upheld or not, will be shared with appropriate Quakers.

Agreed by Area Meeting Trustees on	5 March 2025
Minute number	8.2/25
Signed	
Name signed by (Clerk of Trustees)	
Date for next annual review by Trustees	15 March 2026
The role-holder responsible for starting the next review	Clerk of Trustees