



# Complaints and Complaint Handling Policy

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## 1. Introduction

First Hike Project Inc. (**FHP**) is an Australian not for profit organisation that exists to provide a safe, cost-free and fully catered hiking and camping trip to newly arrived refugees. It is designed to welcome participants and equip them with a new-found understanding of what lies beyond the suburbs, helping them to feel more at home in Australia.

FHP recognizes the importance and value of listening and promptly responding to concerns, grievances and complaints. We are thoroughly committed to achieving the highest standard possible in every area of our work and facilitate continuous improvement processes. This applies especially to the delivery of services, seeking donations and accountability to our stakeholders generally. Receiving concerns, complaints and grievances is one of the most important methods of learning what is required for us to improve our work and outcomes.

## 2. Scope

This Complaints and Complaint Handling Policy (**Policy**) also applies to all our board members, staff, volunteers, contractors, visitors, donors and sponsors and they are familiarised with this Policy. Those with particular relevant responsibilities are trained in its application.

This Policy is intended to apply to any complaint, concern or grievance, regardless of who makes it.

We emphasise the value we place on receiving concerns and complaints in all relevant communications. We advise how a copy of this Policy may be obtained and we provide clear information on how complaints may be made.

We will accept complaints directly relating to our employees, our volunteers, our strategic partners, our contracted service providers or anyone else directly acting on our behalf.

A complaint may be made by a person to whom we deliver services or goods or who is affected by our services or goods, a partner, a local organisation with which we work, our staff, volunteers, donors or a member of the public.

Anonymous complaints can be made, but obviously our ability to investigate them may be limited because of this.

## 3. Definitions

**Complaint** means a complaint is an expression of concern, dissatisfaction or frustration with the quality or delivery of service, a policy or procedure, or the conduct of another person.

**Grievance** means an alleged wrong or hardship suffered, which is the grounds of a complaint.

**Complainant** means a person, organisation or its representative making a complaint.

**Inquiry** means a request for information or an explanation.

**Feedback** means opinions, comments, suggestions and expressions of interest in the products or the complaint handling process

**Stakeholder** or interested party means a person or group having an interest in the performance or success of the organisation.

#### **4. Guiding Principles**

We have adopted the following principles for our Policy.

**Principle 1: Visibility**

We commit to publicise information clearly in relation to how to complain and where to do so.

**Principle 2: Accessibility**

We shall ensure that our complaint handling process is as accessible to all complainants as is practical.

**Principle 3: Responsiveness**

We will respond to complaints according to our predetermined timeframes.

**Principle 4: Objectivity**

We will address all complaints in an equitable, fair and unbiased manner using evidence submitted by both the complainant and our personnel through the complaint handling process.

**Principle 5: Cost**

We provide complainants with a free of charge access to our complaint handling process.

**Principle 6: Confidentiality**

We will observe strict confidentiality in complaint handling.

**Principle 7: Consumer/client-focused approach**

The interests of our consumer/clients are first and foremost in our approach to complaint handling.

**Principle 8: Accountability**

We will ensure that accountability for, and reporting on, the actions and decisions with respect to complaint handling is clearly established.

**Principle 9: Continual Improvement**

Continual improvement of all aspects of the complaint handling process and the quality of services is of our permanent objectives.

#### **5. Education and training**

This Policy has been distributed to all our staff, our volunteers, our partners, our contracted service providers and all others acting on our behalf. We require all those who may be involved in any way with a complaint to formally signify their commitment to this Policy by acknowledging their compliance.

Personnel directly involved in complaint handling are trained in all aspects of this Policy and its implementation. We take special care to train our field personnel to encourage, receive and handle complaints taking account of language issues and cultural sensitivities.

#### **6. Policy publication**

We make clear the value we place on receiving concerns and complaints in all relevant communications. Where literacy is a constraint, we will orally invite expressions of concern and complaint on a regular basis. We will take care to give this invitation in a way that is culturally appropriate recognising that in some cultures people require greater encouragement to make a complaint. We will take special care to facilitate complaints from vulnerable populations including children and marginalised groups.

We ensure that making a complaint to us is as easy as possible. We will take complaints orally in person, over the phone and by any written means. We will do our very best to assist a complainant to put their complaint in writing or to write it down ourselves as faithfully as we can.

All relevant communications, explain our commitment and procedures for handling complaints including:

- where or to whom complaints can be made
- information to be provided by the complainant
- the process for handling complaints
- time periods associated with various stages in the process
- the complainant's options for remedy, including external means
- how the complainant can obtain feedback on the status of the complaint

## **7. How to make a complaint**

We are able to receive complaints orally in person or by telephone and in writing by post, email or online via our website. Where complaints are made orally, we will ensure our write up reporting of the complaint contains all the information the complainant wishes to provide.

Complaints may be made by a friend or advocate of the complainant on their behalf.

Where appropriate, for some projects/programmes we may establish complaint committees involving representatives from partner organisations and members of communities we are serving.

Where appropriate we may utilise complaint/suggestion boxes. We recognise that in some circumstances, complainants may wish to remain anonymous. Because such complaints can alert us to problems that need fixing, we will accept them though clearly it may not be possible to provide a remedy to an individual.

## **8. Complaint handling process**

When an oral complaint is taken, we will:

- identify ourselves, listen, record details, and determine what the client wants
- confirm that we have understood and received the details
- show empathy for the client, but not attempt to take sides, lay blame, or become defensive

For all complaints we will:

- seek from the client the outcome/s they are expecting
- make an initial assessment of the severity of the complaint and the urgency of action
- clearly explain to the client the course of action that will follow:
  - if the complaint is out of our jurisdiction
  - if we may exercise a discretion not to investigate
  - if preliminary enquiries need to be made, or further consideration needs to be given
  - if the complaint is to be investigated
- we will not create false expectations, but assure the client that the complaint will receive full attention
- give an estimated timeframe or, if that is not possible, a date by which we will contact them again

- check whether the client is satisfied with the proposed action and, if not, advise them of alternatives
- ensure that the complaint is appropriately acknowledged
- follow up where necessary, and monitor whether the client is satisfied
- register all complaints

Where appropriate, we will ensure that personnel working in communities we serve have all necessary training to encourage and handle inquiries, expressions of concern and making of complaints so as to take account of cultural and gender sensitivities and to ensure that cases involving children are appropriately handled.

We will ensure that a complainant is not required to express their complaint to a person implicated in their complaint. We will also ensure that a person implicated in a complaint is not involved in any way with the handling of that complaint.

We will first assess whether there is more than one issue raised in the complaint and whether each needs to be separately addressed.

To determine how a complaint should be managed, we will assess it in terms of the following criteria:

- severity
- health (including mental health) and safety implications
- financial implications for the complainant or others
- complexity
- impact on the individual, public and organisation; e) potential to escalate
- systemic implications
- the need for, and possibility of immediate action

If we assess the complaint as significant in terms of one or more of these criteria, we will classify the complaint accordingly.

## **9. Inquiries, minor complaints and jurisdiction**

Determining whether or not a complaint should be investigated is often not easy. If it is based on a misunderstanding or insufficient information it might be that provision of information immediately satisfies the complainant and thus the complainant becomes an inquirer and the complaint can be recorded as an inquiry.

A complaint may be frivolous or capricious. With care it ought to be possible to negotiate its early withdrawal.

A complaint may be vexatious. That is, it is made without sufficient grounds or it is not necessary for the pursuit of a legitimate end, but is made with the intention, or inevitable effect, of causing distress, trouble and annoyance to the person or body who has to deal with it.

A complaint may be about a matter that is outside the jurisdiction of FHP perhaps because it relates to the actions of another organisation or an individual who is unconnected with FHP. It might concern a matter that must be dealt with by the police or other authority of the relevant state and thus the obligation is to notify the police or relevant authority. Such notifiable matters include those that appear to involve criminal offences e.g. assault, sexual or otherwise, theft and severe damage to property. Civil matters such as defamation may also be outside jurisdiction.

FHP will endeavour to deal immediately with inquiries and minor complaints which are made orally by telephone or in person, that is during the initial phone call or meeting. However, as far as possible, we will ensure that the inquirer or complainant is completely satisfied with the information and or resolution provided.

On receipt of a complaint we will also attempt to determine expeditiously whether investigation is required or not depending on jurisdictional questions and whether the complaint is ill conceived.

If the complainant disputes an assessment that a complaint should not be investigated, the member of staff handling the complaint will refer it to a more senior colleague for review.

## **10. Investigation**

We are committed to making every reasonable and practical effort in relation to investigating all relevant circumstances and information surrounding a complaint. The level of investigation will be commensurate with the seriousness and frequency of the complaint.

## **11. Timeframes**

We will acknowledge written complaints within 5 days of receiving them.

We will acknowledge oral complaints immediately upon them being presented.

We will aim to resolve complaints as quickly as practically possible and within 30 days unless there are exceptional circumstances. If a complaint is not resolved within 30 days, we will inform the complainant of progress and keep them informed of progress every two weeks.

## **12. Responding to and closing a complaint**

A senior supervisor/manager delegated by an executive director will normally make the decision on a complaint that has required investigation (that is not a minor complaint). Decisions on serious complaints may be referred to our governing board.

We will communicate our decision on a complaint as soon as is practical. Our communication will be in writing in the appropriate language by email and/or post. However, where appropriate such as in the case of a complaint being made by a local community member (in the field) we will also communicate our decision orally and again in the appropriate language.

We will encourage the complainant to respond and advise whether or not they are satisfied with our decision. In our decision we will advise that if a complainant is not satisfied, we will be prepared to consider any additional information they may provide and to review our decision.

## **13. Outcomes**

We will ensure that all relevant personnel are informed of the outcomes of complaints and the implications for our services, goods, procedures and processes.

We will endeavour to take all required remedial action. We will be prepared to alternate the way in which we operate and improve or undertake further training of all relevant internal parties. Where needed we will counsel or discipline relevant internal parties.

Where appropriate we will consult and take advice from relevant regulatory/enforcement authorities.

## **14. Confidentiality**

We will not reveal a complainant's name or personal details to anyone in or outside our organisation other than staff involved in handling the complaint without obtaining the complainant's permission.

## **15. Records**

We will register all inquiries and complaints. We will ensure that the following information is contained in written complaints and if not, and in the case of oral complaints, record this information ourselves:

- date of receipt
- a description of the complaint and relevant supporting data
- the requested remedy
- the service(s) and/or good(s) and/or practice or procedure complained about
- the due date for a response
- immediate action taken (if any) to resolve the complaint

## **16. Reporting**

We will immediately escalate complex and/or major complaints to our board members for them to delegate.

All complaints will be reported to our management team and all our governing board members when they arise.

Minor complaints will be reported in summary form. Major complaints are reported in detail.

## **17. Continuous improvement**

On a continuing basis we will monitor the effectiveness of our complaint handling and reporting and make improvements as appropriate.

We will:

- maintain data collection on complaints for the purpose of identifying trends for the purpose of enhancing information management and service provided
- keep abreast of best practices (both locally and overseas) regarding complaint handling
- foster a consumer/client-focused approach
- undertake specific training and retraining of staff to foster better complaint handling practices
- encourage innovation in complaint handling development
- recognise and reward exemplary complaint handling behaviour

## **18. Resources**

Code of Conduct  
Complaint Form  
Privacy Policy  
Whistleblower Policy

## **19. Review**

This Policy is reviewed on an annual basis.

# Complaints Management Flowchart

