

# TOOLKIT

## MANAGING COMPLAINTS: A BEST-PRACTICE TOOLKIT FOR AID ORGANISATIONS

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This toolkit was produced by Christine Williamson, Director at Duty of Care International, in close collaboration with Coline Rapneau, CHS Alliance's PSEAH Manager. It was reviewed by Stephanie Ross, the copyeditor. In the process of developing this toolkit the author drew on many sources, including documents from various organisations from the aid sector; public research; as well as feedback and resources from CHS Alliance members and non-members.

CHS Alliance would like to thank the many individuals and organisations consulted in the process of producing this toolkit, for generously sharing their knowledge and expertise. CHS Alliance would also like to express its appreciation to USAID's Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), whose funding made this project possible.

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## INTRODUCTION

**In an organisational setting, managing complaints requires a careful, systematic, and compassionate approach. Such complaints can have significant personal, legal, and reputational implications, and the way they are handled can be testament to an organisation's values and commitment to its staff and stakeholders.**

In this toolkit, we include practical tools, templates, and resources, which are designed to help organisations address sensitive complaints with fairness, transparency, and empathy, ensuring a safe and respectful environment for all. The following have been developed to support organisations in navigating these sensitive matters with the highest level of professionalism and empathy.

This toolkit is complemented by:

- A guidance which provides key steps and considerations for effectively recognising and managing a sensitive complaint, while ensuring fairness, transparency, and care throughout the process.
- An eLearning module, with five short sections exploring the fundamentals underpinning all complaint management systems pre- and post-investigation; the different aspects of receiving, classifying, and channelling complaints, and the process for managing complaints that are sensitive, non-sensitive, and those related to sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment (SEAH).

Links to be  
added once  
confirmed

# CONTENTS

## 1. SUMMARY OF KEY STEPS FOR ALL ORGANISATIONS

A summary of the key steps (the basics) and principles (in bold and green) that all organisations, regardless of their size or means, must incorporate at each stage of their complaint process.

### 1. Receiving the complaint

- Designate a specific person or team as the first point of contact for complaints. This designated individual or team should undergo training in the organisation's complaint procedures, with a strong emphasis on **sensitivity** and maintaining **confidentiality** throughout the process.
- Offer multiple avenues for lodging a complaint, e.g., phone line, email, in-person meeting, to ensure accessibility.



### 2. Classifying the complaint

- Develop a classification system based on the nature of complaints.
- Prioritise urgent complaints, especially those threatening **safety**.
- Ensure those classifying the complaints have undergone **training and awareness** sessions to understand the nature and severity of different issues.

### 3. Recording and tracking the complaint

- Implement a centralised, secure database to record complaints, ensuring **confidentiality**.
- Regularly update the status of the complaint (**timely**).
- Inform complainants about the process, its stages, and potential outcomes (**transparency and communication**).

### 4. Channelling the complaint

- Channel the complaint based on its classification to ensure **timeliness**.
- Employ **non-discrimination** by ensuring complaints are routed based on their nature and not influenced by personal biases.

## 5. Managing and resolving the complaint

- Investigate the complaint using an unbiased procedure, ensuring **due process**. If impartiality is challenging due to the organisation's size, consider involving an unbiased third party.
- **Safety** is paramount. Collaborate with local organisations if needed to ensure both physical and emotional wellbeing of the involved parties.
- For **informed consent**, always consider and obtain the complainant's consent before taking any action.
- **Accountability and oversight**: if potential conflicts of interest arise, especially with senior members, having a board or advisory committee can be invaluable for guidance.

## 6. Closing the loop

- Once resolved, communicate the outcome, practicing **transparency** and **communication**.
- Offer avenues for appeal, reiterating the organisation's commitment to **due process**.
- When possible, use **continuous improvement** practices to reflect on the complaint's handling and make necessary changes for the future.



### Important to remember

- Maintaining **confidentiality** amidst informal setups.
- Ensuring **non-discrimination** in tight-knit communities.
- Finding the balance between **transparency**, **communication**, and **privacy**.
- **Training and awareness**: leveraging online resources or collaborating with other organisations to provide necessary training when formal training is not feasible.

## 2. COMPLAINT INFORMATION TOOL<sup>1</sup> AND COMPLAINT INFORMATION TEMPLATE<sup>2</sup> (FILLABLE)

These tools help summarise details of the complaint, including the critical information investigators need to begin planning the investigation process and interviews. Such documents are and should remain confidential and as such should be saved as a new version before being used.

## 3. TEMPLATE TO ACKNOWLEDGE A COMPLAINT

### Template letter



[Organisation Letterhead or Email Header]  
[Date]

[Recipient Name]  
[Recipient Address/Email]  
Subject: Acknowledgment of Your Complaint Dated [Complaint Date]

Dear [Recipient Name],

We are writing to acknowledge the receipt of your complaint dated [Complaint Date]. We understand the sensitive nature of the concerns you raised, and we want to assure you that your complaint is being treated with the utmost confidentiality and care.

Your complaint has been logged under reference number: [Unique Complaint Reference Number].

Our team is in the process of reviewing the details, and we aim to provide you with a substantive update by [specific date or timeline, e.g., “within two weeks”]. In the meantime, if you have any questions or require further information, please feel free to contact [Designated Contact Person’s Name] at [Contact Information].

We appreciate your patience and thank you for bringing this matter to our attention. Your feedback is vital in helping us maintain and improve our standards.

Warm regards,  
[Team name]

<sup>1</sup> [https://d1h79zlgft2zs.cloudfront.net/uploads/2022/04/IQTS-Complaint\\_Information-Tool.pdf](https://d1h79zlgft2zs.cloudfront.net/uploads/2022/04/IQTS-Complaint_Information-Tool.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://d1h79zlgft2zs.cloudfront.net/uploads/2022/04/IQTS-Complaint\\_Information-Template\\_fillable.pdf](https://d1h79zlgft2zs.cloudfront.net/uploads/2022/04/IQTS-Complaint_Information-Template_fillable.pdf)

## Breakdown of the template letter

- **Letter/email header:** use a professional letterhead or email header, indicating the organization's name and contact details.
- **Date and recipient Info:** clearly state the date of the acknowledgment letter and the recipient's contact details.
- **Subject:** reference the date of the complaint for clarity.
- **Greeting:** address the recipient respectfully.
- **Acknowledgment:** confirm that you have received the complaint, emphasising that you understand its sensitivity.
- **Reference number:** offer a unique reference number for the complaint. This helps in tracking and future communications.
- **Review process:** briefly explain the steps you're taking to address the complaint.
- **Timeline:** provide a clear timeline for when they can expect further communication.
- **Contact point:** designate a specific contact person and provide their contact information for further questions.
- **Appreciation:** thank the complainant for bringing the issue to your attention, underscoring the importance of their feedback.
- **Sign-off:** close the letter professionally with the team name (not your name to avoid personalisation of the complaint response).



### Reminder

While the template is structured and official, it is crucial to ensure a genuine and empathetic tone when addressing sensitive complaints. Adjust the wording as necessary to fit the specific circumstances and tone you want to convey.





## 4. INVESTIGATION RISK ASSESSMENT TOOL<sup>3</sup> AND TEMPLATE<sup>4</sup>

These tool and template have been taken from the CHS PSEAH investigation toolkit. The risk assessment tool provides investigators and the investigation team with a summary format for documenting risk-related information. It also acts as:

- a risk management tool, highlighting which risks present the highest probability and impact in an investigation;
- response strategies if the risk happens;
- mitigation strategies for reducing the probability that the risk will happen; and names the person responsible for taking actions to mitigate the risk or address the risk, should it happen.

## 5. VICTIM/SURVIVOR-CENTRED REFERRAL SERVICES

The graphic below shows an overview of the types of services victim/survivors may need.



Source: <https://safeguardingsupporthub.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/UN%20Victim%20Assistance%20Protocol%20pres%20%282%29.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> [https://d1h79zlgft2zs.cloudfront.net/uploads/2022/04/IQTS-Risk\\_Assessment-Tool.pdf](https://d1h79zlgft2zs.cloudfront.net/uploads/2022/04/IQTS-Risk_Assessment-Tool.pdf)

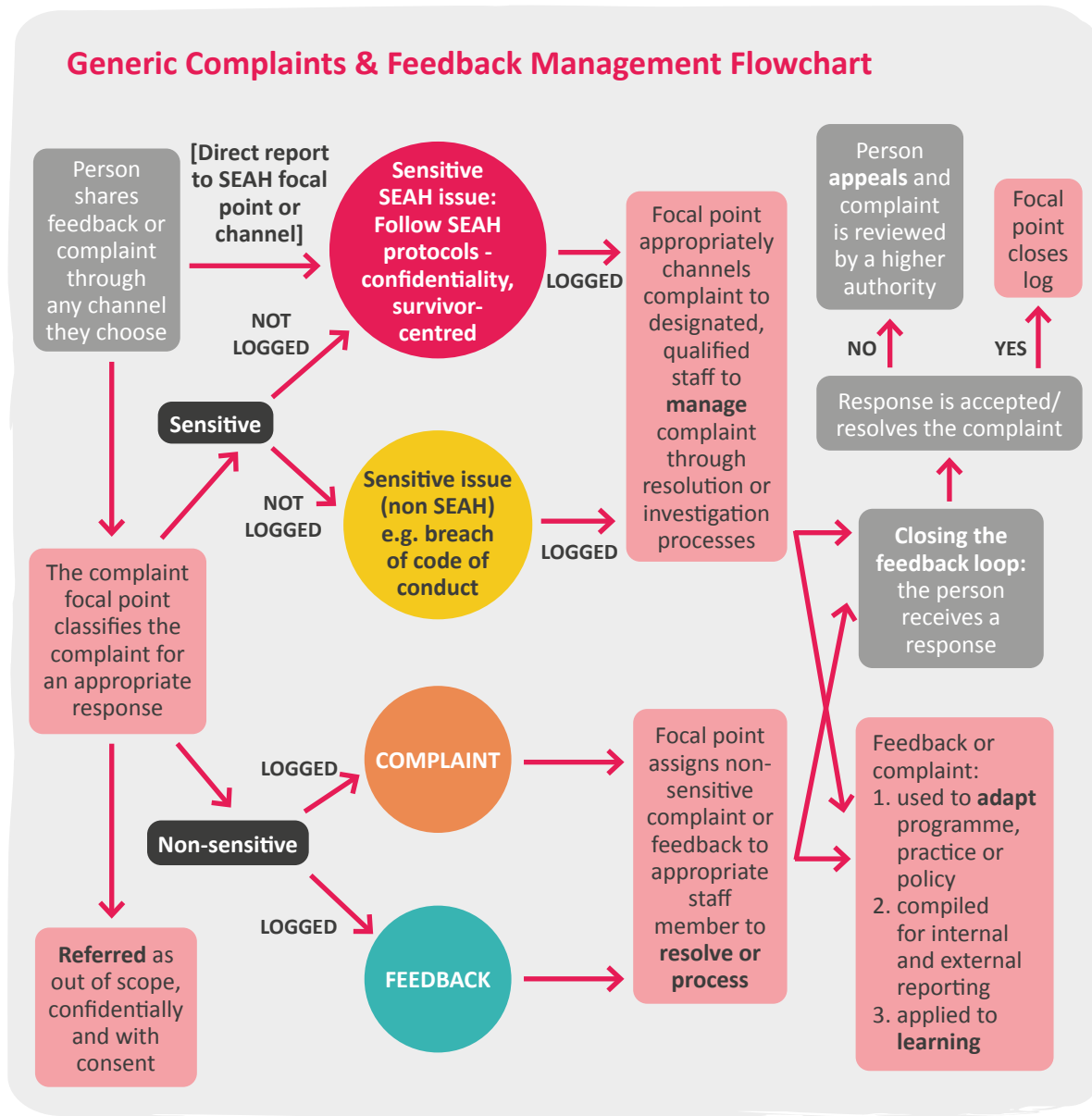
<sup>4</sup> [https://d1h79zlgft2zs.cloudfront.net/uploads/2022/04/IQTS-Risk\\_Assessment-Template\\_fillable.pdf](https://d1h79zlgft2zs.cloudfront.net/uploads/2022/04/IQTS-Risk_Assessment-Template_fillable.pdf)

## 6. COMPLAINT MANAGEMENT RESPONSE FLOWCHART

When developing a process for managing a complaint, it is useful to start with the development of a flowchart to illustrate the different steps to take at each stage of the process, as well as each person's roles (individually or in team).

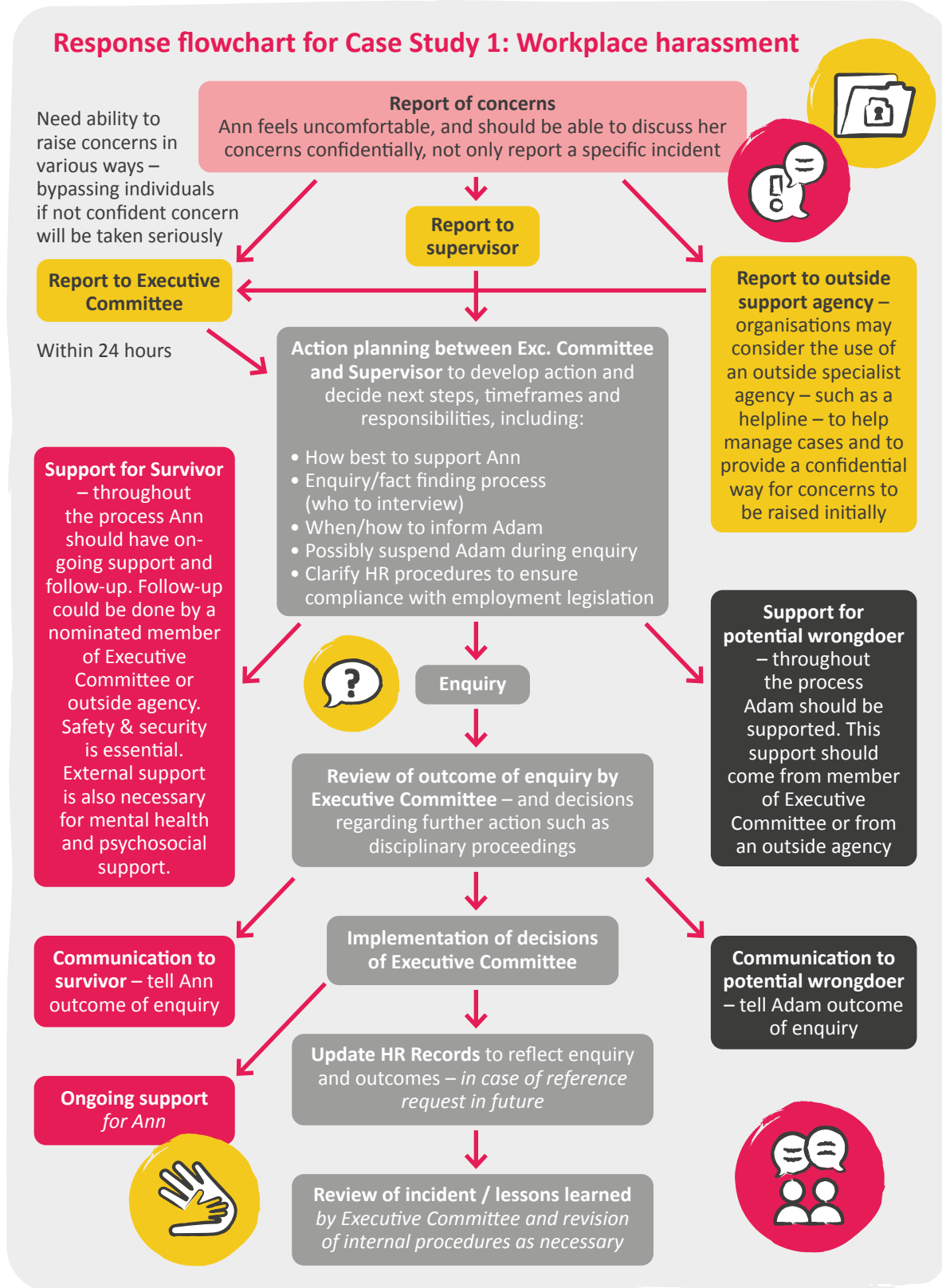
It is also important to adapt the flowchart for each context where your organisation works.

### Flowchart example 1



Source: CHS Alliance

Flowchart example 2



Source: Infographic influenced from BOND, 2019, 20 Core Elements: A Toolkit To Strengthen Safeguarding Report Handling, p.29, [https://www.bond.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/bond\\_20\\_core\\_elements\\_a\\_toolkit\\_to\\_strengthen\\_safeguarding.pdf](https://www.bond.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/bond_20_core_elements_a_toolkit_to_strengthen_safeguarding.pdf)

## 7. COMPLAINT REPORTING CHECKLIST (FOCUSING ON SEAH CASES)

This is a tool for organisations to use to assess their complaints management system, even if this one specifically focuses on SEAH incidents.

MEASURES	IN PLACE	PARTIALLY DONE	NOT IN PLACE
<b>Internal reporting routes</b>			
Do you have a range of options for reporting online and in person?			
Are these options accessible to both staff members and communities?			
Do these options take into consideration barriers such as illiteracy, lack of phone network or access, mobility restrictions, cultural norms, etc?			
<b>Procedures for reporting</b>			
Do the procedures include information for people making reports and instructions for those with responsibility to respond?			
Is there a template for reporting, recording case information?			
Do you have a confidential database for recording case information?			
Is it clear when and how to report to donors, regulatory authorities and formal authorities?			
Linking reporting with other organisational systems/processes			
Is it clear that reporting and response must be confidential?			
Is there a policy on confidentiality, the breach of which results in disciplinary action?			
Does the organisation have disciplinary procedures? Is it clear in these what happens if someone perpetrates SEAH?			

Source: Developed by CHS Alliance for their harmonised SEAH data collection and reporting scheme, <https://www.chsalliance.org/protection-from-sexual-exploitationabuse-and-sexual-harassment/harmonised-seah/>

MEASURES	IN PLACE	PARTIALLY DONE	NOT IN PLACE
<b>Assign roles and responsibilities</b>			
Have you assigned a focal point for SEAH?			
Have you assigned focal points for receiving complaints or reports from the community?			
Have you agreed on how investigations will be conducted? (internally or using external expertise)			
Have you assigned selected individuals to handle and make decisions on cases (at manager level)?			
<b>Training on reporting and case handling</b>			
Have you trained the focal points on receiving a disclosure and handling case information?			
Have you trained internal investigators (if using them)?			
Have you trained managers appointed to support case handling and decision-making on cases?			
<b>External services and referral pathways</b>			
Have you mapped all available services and referral pathways to support survivors?			
Have you obtained contact details to access these services?			
Do you know that these services are safe to use?			
<b>Communicating with staff on reporting</b>			
Have you included the reporting routes and what happens once reports are made in staff training on SEAH?			
Have you publicised how to report through different means, e.g. posters in offices, pop-ups on computers, newsletters?			
Have you supported managers to talk about SEAH and how to report in team meetings etc.?			
<b>Raising awareness with communities</b>			
Have you included awareness raising on SEAH and reporting in community engagement activities?			

## 8. EXAMPLES OF KEY SEAH PRINCIPLES



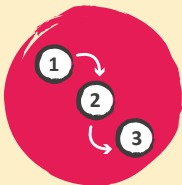
### Safe and accessible

- Range of options, online and in person.
- Ensure all groups, particularly those most at-risk or marginalized, have meaningful access to the reporting options.



### Link reporting to confidentiality/discipline procedures

- Clear on confidentiality requirements and what happens if confidentiality is breached.
- Clear on what disciplinary measures will be applied in the event the report is confirmed.



### Establish reporting routes internally

- For all those being encouraged to report, and those who will need to respond.
- Include how and when to report case information to donors and regulatory and formal authorities.
- Include a template for reporting, recording case information.
- Develop database for recording case information.



### Assign roles and responsibilities to selected and key individuals

- 'Focal Points' for SEAH.
- Investigators (*if this will be managed internally*).
- Decision-makers/managers for final decisions on reports/investigations.
- Community complaints 'focal points' who will receive complaints or reports from the community.



### **Train the selected and key individuals**

- Train on receiving a disclosure.
- Train on case handling.
- Train on investigations – managing and conducting depending on how this will be managed.



### **Communicate with staff on reporting mechanisms and duty to report**

- Include in SEAH training.
- Communicate through organisational communication routes incl. team meetings etc.



### **Map external services and referral pathways**

- Ensure you are able to safely refer survivors or SEAH to comprehensive survivor-centred services.
- Continuous process to ensure details are current and accurate.



### **Raise awareness with communities on complaints or reporting mechanisms**

- If possible, consult communities on how they would like to make reports and develop reporting avenues that work for them.
- Include reporting information in ways that suit community engagement e.g. community meetings, info notes in distribution packages.



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