



**Pacific Assist**  
Inspiring Self-reliance

# **Complaints Handling Policy**

## **2020**

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## Policy Statement

As outlined in our core principles of self-reliance, Pacific Assist is committed to the common good, treating individuals and communities with respect and dignity, and meeting our obligations to our neighbours – including seeking to build empathy through a “listen first” approach. Further, we are committed to building a development mindset expressed through mutual learning and dialogue and reflection on practice and experience that includes receiving feedback from peers and stakeholders. Pacific Assist’s complaint handling policy is one means of meeting these commitments.

## Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to outline the processes to be followed for receiving and handling complaints in a fair and timely manner.

## Scope

This policy applies to the organisation as a whole and to all Pacific Assist projects and is to be adhered to by all personnel, volunteers, partners, and service providers as it relates to their involvement with Pacific Assist projects.

## Definition

Pacific Assist defines complaints as any expression of dissatisfaction about the performance and/or behaviour of the organisation or any individual personnel, volunteer, partner, and/or service provider. Complaints may relate to the organisation as whole, or be confined to specific projects.

## Policy

It is Pacific Assist policy that personnel, volunteers, partners, primary stakeholders, participants, service providers, and any others engaging with Pacific Assist have a right to make complaints, and that complaints should be responded to effectively and in a fair and timely way. Complainants also have a right to make an appeal to the board of directors or to external bodies if they are unsatisfied with decisions or actions taken/not taken in relation to their complaint.

We take a survivor-centric approach that includes providing appropriate assistance and referrals to survivors that may include referrals to medical, social, legal and financial assistance, or other services based on the needs and wishes of the survivor. It also includes a process to de-identify complaints at the request of the complainant or survivor.

As a member of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), Pacific Assist adheres to the ACFID Code of Conduct. If Pacific Assist is thought to be in breach of the Code of Conduct, personnel, volunteers, partners, primary stakeholders, participants, service providers, and any others engaging with Pacific Assist can make a complaint regarding the alleged breach directly to the [ACFID Code of Conduct Committee](#).

## Principles

The following principles underpin Pacific Assist's complaint handling approach:

1. **Visibility:** Clearly publicise information about how and where to complain
2. **Accessibility:** Ensure that the complaints handling process is accessible
3. **Respect:** Ensure that complainants are treated respectfully, listened to, kept informed and supported in exercising their right to make a complaint without fear of discrimination
4. **Confidentiality:** Observe strict confidentiality in complaint handling
5. **Ongoing Learning:** Continue to learn from the complaints received to inform improvements as needed

## Procedures

### Publicise

- Publish Pacific Assist's complaint handling process on the website, in volunteer and participant registration forms, in personnel induction information, and in MOU's and statements of engagements
- Include a review of the complaint handling process in project induction training

### Making a Complaint

To make a complaint, complainants can:

- Speak directly to their project coordinator

- Send an email to the project coordinator, projects manager, or [info@pacificassist.org](mailto:info@pacificassist.org) (received by the projects manager)
- Complaints about the projects manager should be sent directly to the Chair (email and mobile are available on the Pacific Assist website under About Us: Our Team)
- Phone us on +61 427 681 232 (AUS)
- Navigate to the Feedback/Make a Complaint page on the Pacific Assist web page [www.pacificassist.org](http://www.pacificassist.org) (see About: Feedback/Make a Complaint)
- Mail a letter addressed to the projects manager, women and children’s advocate, or the chair of the board to Level 4/420 Collins Street, Melbourne 3000 Victoria Australia
- Visit our office and make a face-to-face complaint
- Anonymous complaints can be made by mail or by completing the “Email A Complaint” form on the website (leave the name, phone contact, and email address sections blank)
- Provide feedback through monitoring and evaluation processes
- Complaints can also be made via the following Pacific Assist management meetings:
  - Project committee meetings
  - Pacific Assist planning and development meetings
  - Quarterly board of directors meetings

If any person believes that Pacific Assist has breached the ACFID Code of Conduct a complaint can be lodged directly on the ACFID website to the Code of Conduct Committee at [www.acfid.asn.au](http://www.acfid.asn.au) .

## Receiving and Recording a Complaint

Review the following relevant policies when receiving and recording a complaint:

- Complaints Handling Policy
- Child Safety and Well-being Policy
- Fraud & Corruption Prevention Policy
- Safeguarding Policy
- Safeguarding Incident Response Plan
- Whistleblowing Policy
- Human Resources (Section 5: Grievances)

Always remain friendly and treat the complainant respectfully. Be particularly sensitive and compassionate in the case of sexual exploitation and/or abuse allegations. All complaints

must remain confidential except for the reporting of the complaint to the appropriate people as per the procedures below. **All reports relating to child safety and wellbeing or serious misconduct must be referred to the projects manager immediately.**

As soon as the complaint is received, use the Complaint Handling Record to record the complaint. Record the following details:

- The name, email, and mobile number of the person/s making the complaint
- The date, time, location, and method of the complaint
- A brief description of the complaint, the discussion with the complainant, and any agreed actions to be taken

Advise the complainant that any time they can request to have their complaint record de-identified (have their personal details, including their name, amended so that they are hidden or unrecognisable). See Appendix 4 of the Complaint Handling Record for the process of de-identifying records.

Thank the complainant for raising their concerns and assure them that the complaint will be handled in a fair and timely manner. Also inform the complainant that they will receive a progress update within five days.

Assess who should handle the complaint by applying the following criteria:

- **All complaints (including those about partners and service providers) relating to child safety and wellbeing, alleged sexual exploitation and abuse, sexual harassment, bullying, discrimination, research misconduct, and/or fraud and corruption should be referred to the projects manager immediately.** Refer all complaints against Pacific Assist's project manager to Pacific Assist's chair of the board of directors
- In the first instance, complaints relating to specific projects, with the exceptions of those listed above, should be handled by the project coordinator. If the complaint is beyond the authority, experience, and or/capacity of the projects coordinator, the matter should be referred to the projects manager
- Organisational complaints should be handled by the projects manager unless the complaint is about the projects manager. All complaints about the projects manager should be referred to the chair of the board of directors
- Complaints about partners should be referred in accordance with the complaint handling policy in the relevant MOU (this will stipulate who to report complaints to in the partner organisation). A password protected PDF version of the Complaint

Handling Record outlining the initial report should also be sent to the projects manager and the chair of the board of directors

- Complaints that do not fall within the scope of this policy (e.g. complaints against another organisation or Government department) should be referred to the projects manager

Assign the complaint to the appropriate person by recording their name on the Complaint Handling Record as the person handling the complaint. If you are not the person to handle the complaint, send an email with the following text and a password protected PDF version of the Complaint Handling Record (send the password via SMS message):

[Insert salutation],

As per the attached Complaint Handling Record, we have received a complaint from [insert complainants name]. As per the complaints assessment criteria, the complaint has been assigned to you.

On receiving this complaint, you should notify your direct line manager via email within 24 hours to notify them that you have received the complaint.

Regards,

[Insert name].

Once the email has been sent, file the PDF version of the Complaints Handling Record outlining the initial report in the appropriate Complaints Handling folder. Project specific complaints are filed in the specific project complaints handling folder. Organisational complaints are filed in the following file path location: "P:\Pacific Assist\Company Management\Governance & Compliance\Complaint Handling\Complaint Handling Record (Complainant Name) – Initial Complaint Date.docx "

Once the record has been scanned and filed, shred any hard copies. Save a copy of any emailed complaints in the appropriate complaints handling folder and delete the original email.

## Handling Complaints

Once the complaint has been assessed and assigned to the appropriate person, the person handling the complaint should:

- For complaints about child safety and wellbeing including sexual exploitation or abuse, immediately refer to Pacific Assist's Child Safety and Wellbeing Policy and

Safeguarding Policy. Use the Child Safety and Wellbeing Complaint Form to manage the complaint (see Appendix 1 of the Complaint Handling Form)

- For complaints about fraud and corruption or other serious misconduct, immediately refer to Pacific Assist's Fraud and Corruption Prevention Policy, Safeguarding Policy, and Whistle Blowing Policy. Use the Misconduct Report Form to manage the complaint (see Appendix 2 of the Complaint Handling Form)
- For complaints outside the scope of the Complaints Handling Policy (e.g. complaints against another organisation or government department), the projects manager uses the Complaint Referral Report Form to manage the complaint (see Appendix 3 of the Complaint Handling Form). Before a complaint referral can be made to another organisation/department/other entity, the complainant must authorise the referral by signing the Complaint Referral Report Form where indicated. Referrals are also to be approved by the Chair of the Board of Directors (they also review and sign the Complaint Referral Report Form)
- For complaints about research misconduct the projects manager and/or directors should refer to the Guide to Managing and Investigating Potential Breaches of the Code (the Investigation Guide). This guide outlines the preferred model for institutions to use to investigate and manage potential breaches, determine any corrective actions to ensure the integrity of the research record and when a finding of research misconduct may be made. (Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research, 2018, p.1)
- If there is evidence that the complaint is credible, and/or the complainant is at risk of harm, immediately report criminal behaviour including child physical and sexual abuse (including family violence), and fraud and corruption to police
- For all other types of complaints Inform their direct line manager via email of the complaint within 24 hours of receiving the complaint. For complaints of child safety and wellbeing, including sexual exploitation or abuse, or fraud and corruption inform the chair of the board of directors immediately
- Explore options and solutions that may help to resolve the concern (complaints involving complex issues should be discussed with the projects manager and/or the board of directors)
- As necessary investigate the complaint:
  1. Establish the facts and gather relevant information
  2. If necessary and/or practicable, interview those involved
- Make a record of all discussions and actions taken in relation to investigating and/or resolving the complaint

- Respond in writing to the complainant within 5 days about the outcome of their complaint, including any corrective action, timeline for implementation, and the person/role addressing the issue
- If a resolution of the complaint will take longer than five days, within five days of receiving the complaint, provide a written update to the complainant outlining the intended resolution process and timeframe
- Once the complaint is resolved, complete the complaint outcome section of the Complaint Handling Record
- As necessary, scan any hardcopy information and create the final PDF version of the Complaint Handling Record. The record should be named “Complaint Handling Record (Complainant Name) – Final Record Date” and filed in the appropriate complaints handling folder. Once all information has been scanned and saved, shred any hardcopy material
- If a complaint cannot be resolved by the process outlined above, refer it to the board of directors via email with a request to review the complaint and attach a PDF version of the Complaint Handling Record outlining the initial handling of the complaint. Name the record “Complaint Handling Record (Complainant Name) – Unresolved Date.” Copy the projects manager in the email. File the record in the appropriate complaints handling folder. Once all information has been scanned and saved, shred any hardcopy material.
- The complainant may also appeal any decisions/actions taken by a project coordinator or the projects manager. Appeals should be referred to the board of directors as per the referral process outlined above
- Inform the complainant in writing of the decision to refer the complaint to the board of directors and provide a revised timeframe for resolution

### Complaints Reviewed by the Board of Directors

The board of directors will review unresolved complaints or appeals of decisions/actions taken by project coordinators or the projects manager. To review referred complaints or appeals, the board of directors should:

- Review the Complaint Handling Record
- Interview the complainant to hear first-hand their concerns
- Meet with the projects coordinator and/or projects manager to review the complaint and any decision or actions taken
- If necessary, investigate the matter further
- Assess the merits of the complaint and/or the appeal of decisions/actions taken

After reviewing and assessing the unresolved complaint or the appeal of decisions/actions taken, the board of directors must decide whether to:

- Dismiss the complaint or determine appropriate corrective action
- Reconsider the original decision and take additional corrective action
- Overturn previous decisions and institute new measures considered necessary
- Endorse the action that has already been taken with no further action required

The board should respond in writing to the complainant within 24 hours of the board's decision outlining the decision, including any corrective action, changes to the original decision, timeline for implementation, the option for external review by external dispute resolution agency if the complainant is unsatisfied with the decision and actions of the board of directors, and the name and contact details of the director responsible for managing the review. Options for external review include:

- Take the matter to the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria – a free mediation service offered by the Victorian Government (1300 372 888 / <https://www.disputes.vic.gov.au> )
- Take the matter to arbitration. The decision of the arbitrator is binding. For more information about arbitration contact the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria (1300 372 888) or Victoria Legal Aid (1300 792 387)
- If the complaint relates to a matter outside of Victoria, provide determine a relevant interstate, national, or international dispute settlement agency to mediate the dispute

After review by the board of directors and any independent body, the projects manager will complete the “complaint outcome after review by the board of directors” section of the Complaint Handling Record and file in the appropriate complaint handling folder as “Complaint Handling Record (Complainant Name) – Final Record Date.”

Once all information has been scanned and saved, shred any hardcopy material.

### Referral Process for Complaints Outside the Scope of this Policy

The projects manager handles all referrals for complaints that do not fall within the scope of this policy (e.g. complaints against another organisation or government department).

Referrals may also be made to service providers that might be able to assist the complainant. Services could include medical, social, legal and financial, or others based on the needs and wishes of the complainant.

Upon receiving a complaint, the projects manager:

- Uses the Complaint Referral Report Form to manage the referral process (see Appendix 3 of the Complaint Handling Form)
- Follows the process outlined in the Complaint Referral Report Form for accessing the external organisation's/department's/other entities complaint handling policy and for referring the complaint to the complaint handling officer
- Includes in the complaint referral a request that Pacific Assist's project manager:
  - Be kept informed of the result of the initial assessment of the complaint
  - Be informed of any action to be taken as a result of the initial assessment
  - Be informed about outcomes of any action, including any investigation undertaken in addition to the initial assessment and any reports made to police or other authorities or agencies
  - Receives a copy of the final report on the outcomes of the complaint
- Provides the complainant with the contact details of the complaint handling officer the complaint has been referred to
- As appropriate and in accordance with Pacific Assist's Privacy Policy, updates the complainant on the progress of the referred complaint
- Follows the process outlined in the Complaint Referral Report Form for referring the complainant to relevant support service providers as required
- Once the complaint is resolved, completes the Referred Complaint Outcome section of the Complaint Referral Report Form and files it as directed
- As appropriate, provides a written summary of the key findings and outcomes to the complainant. Includes in the summary a note that if the complainant is unhappy with the findings, recommendations, decisions, and/or disciplinary actions of the external organisation/department/other entity they can:
  - Take the matter to the Australian Council for International Development
  - Take the matter to the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria – a free mediation service offered by the Victorian Government (1300 372 888 / <https://www.disputes.vic.gov.au> )
  - Take the matter to arbitration. The decision of the arbitrator is binding. For more information about arbitration contact the Dispute Settlement Centre of Victoria (1300 372 888) or Victoria Legal Aid (1300 792 387)
  - If the complaint relates to a matter outside of Victoria, provides the complainant with the name and contact details of a relevant interstate, national or international dispute settlement agency

## Learning from Complaints

Pacific Assist embraces evaluation and monitoring as an opportunity to listen, improve effectiveness and efficiency, and broaden the organisation's knowledge, capacity, expertise, and perspectives. Reviewing and learning from complaints is a part of our ongoing monitoring and evaluation process. Reviews of complaint handling reports help identify what isn't working and where course corrections need to be made.

Once a complaint has been resolved, the project coordinator or the projects manager reviews the Complaint Handling Record to identify areas for improvement and to determine if there is any need for changes to policies and procedures. In the case of complaints handled by the project coordinator, results are shared with the project leadership and management committee. The committee includes in their evaluation and monitoring reports to the board of directors any recommendations for changes to the project plan and/or policies and procedures based on the review of complaint handling reports. In the case of complaints handled by the projects manager, results and any recommendations for changes to policies and procedures are shared with the board of directors. Recommended changes must be approved by the board before being implemented.

There are many ways to reflect on results and lessons to inform and improve practice. These include, but are not limited to:

- Holding workshops for leadership and management committee members, participants, and primary stakeholders to discuss results and their implications
- Conducting roundtables with other NGO's and relevant agencies to share, discuss, and reflect on the implications of results
- Sharing results with and seeking feedback from advisory boards and others well qualified and experienced in the context and domain of the project
- Using social media forums for hosting discussions about results and their implications
- Establishment of a shared data base capturing data and lessons

## Induction and Training

As part of their induction, and at least semi-annually, project coordinators, the projects manager, and directors will review:

- Human Resources Policy (Section 5: Grievances)

- Complaints Handling Policy
- Complaints Handling Reports - Template
- Child Safety and Well-being Policy
- Safeguarding Policy
- Safeguarding Incident Response Plan
- Fraud and Corruption Prevention Policy
- Whistleblowing Policy