

WHITWORTH & DISTRICT COMPLAINTS POLICY

Introduction

In Whitworth and District u3a ('the u3a'), as in any organisation, problems and grievances will inevitably occur from time to time. Most of these are resolved quickly and effectively by informal means. However, there are also occasions when more formal procedures are necessary, potentially leading to more serious consequences. Depending on the nature and source of the problem, the Trustees will decide how best to resolve the situation. The purpose of this Code of Practice is to ensure that members know where to get advice and support; that any problems are dealt with fairly, using agreed procedures; and that the procedures used in the u3a are consistent with the policies of the Third Age Trust.

The types of difficulties that might arise include (but are not limited to) the following situations:

- Interpersonal problems and disagreements between members
- Lack of communication
- Disruptive, abusive or unsocial behaviour, including inappropriate comments in U3A group emails, on the u3a website or on social media platforms
- Unsatisfactory timekeeping
- Unsatisfactory attendance
- Failure to pay fees
- Failure to carry out agreed tasks
- Failure to abide by the regulations of the venue or any reasonable instruction from a group leader or event organiser
- Failure to take responsibility for u3a equipment or property, or those belonging to a third party
- Bringing the u3a into disrepute
- Failure to abide by the u3a constitution
- Complaints from an external organisation
- In dealing with difficult situations the Trustees will ensure that:
 - All decisions and actions will be documented
 - Problems will be dealt with fairly and as quickly as possible
 - Attempts will be made to de-escalate the situation and settle issues informally
 - Confidentiality will be maintained; liaising with or obtaining advice from the Third Age Trust will not constitute a breach of confidentiality
 - Decisions will be based on the facts and evidence available.

Informal procedure for resolving difficulties.

Informal procedures for resolving difficulties must include establishing the facts as fully and quickly as possible, creating channels of communication amongst those concerned and maintaining

confidentiality. Informal procedures may include consulting the appropriate Trustee, all of the Trustees, or the Third Age Trust. Members are also free to obtain advice from any of the Trustees, from u3a officers, or from the Third Age Trust.

In the majority of circumstances, informal discussions are preferable to formal procedures. Those in a position of responsibility in the situation, such as Group Leaders or event organisers, are expected to use their judgement about the best way to handle the situation, making suitable adjustments for individual circumstances and calling on relevant Trustees for advice or support where necessary. Actions taken might include arranging a meeting between the parties involved, giving informal guidance about behaviour, changing some procedures, or requesting a member not to attend a specific venue or group.

If necessary, a member can be excluded from a venue, group or event for a short period or an unlimited amount of time. Group Leaders or event organisers will inform the Trustees in writing if they decide to exclude a member from a venue, group or event, and will provide the Trustees with relevant background to their decision.

Formal procedure for resolving difficulties.

If informal methods fail to resolve the situation, then more formal action may be necessary. Any formal course of action must involve Trustees. A Trustee sub-committee is normally the best arrangement for the initial stages of any formal procedure. In normal circumstances it is preferable for the Chair not to be included in any Trustee sub-committee of this type. In the event of an appeal the Chair should be directly involved, so avoiding any earlier involvement will help to ensure that the Chair can be impartial. If the matter is extremely serious or important issues of principle are raised then the Chair will normally be involved, and in some cases the full Trustee body may be involved.

When an issue is being investigated, normally the member(s) concerned will be informed of this. Any decisions made by the Trustee sub-committee, and any follow up action that may be required, will be communicated in writing to the member(s) concerned and to the Trustees.

After investigating the issue, the Trustee sub-committee may decide that some type of disciplinary action is necessary. Possible courses of action include the following:

- Verbal warning: this must involve at least two Trustees and must be confirmed in writing
- Written warning: this must involve at least two Trustees
- Final written warning: this must involve at least two Trustees
- More serious courses of action include:
 - Suspension from the u3a
 - Exclusion from the u3a

Any decision relating to suspension or exclusion from the u3a must be taken by the Trustees, not by a sub-committee. Discussions relating to suspension or exclusion will be minuted but remain confidential. Decisions relating to suspension or exclusion will be communicated to the relevant

person(s) in writing. At any point the Trustees may wish to obtain independent advice or support from a neighbouring u3a, the Northwest Region u3a, or the Third Age Trust.

Right of appeal: in the case of a proposed suspension or exclusion from a group, event, venue, or the u3a at the end of a disciplinary procedure, the member concerned has the right to be heard by the Trustees, wherever possible within two weeks of a decision being reached. The member has the right to be accompanied by a friend (who may also have the opportunity to speak), and/or make written representation to the Trustees before a final decision is made. Trustees will review their decision in the light of representations made to them and any mitigating circumstances brought to their attention, and then make a final decision. The Trustees' decision following an appeal is final and not open to further appeal.

Policy agreed at committee on 21st August 2023 adopting guidance from the Third Age Trust.
