

Managing Internal Complaints

From time to time, Clubs will be asked to investigate and mediate internal disputes between Members such as parents, players and Coaches over issues ranging from behaviour to disputes over playing time. It is strongly recommended that Clubs adopt a robust internal complaints procedure to ensure these matters are dealt with in a fair and transparent manner.

The complaints procedure should be accessible to all members, and should, as a minimum, explain:

- How to make a complaint;
- An initial point of contact and their contact details (usually the Club Secretary, Chair or Welfare Officer);
- Who will be responsible for investigating and reviewing the complaint;
- The process they will take; and
- What kind of action may be taken.

The person carrying out the investigation should never be an individual who has, or could be perceived to have, a conflict of interest regarding the complainant, or the subject of the complaint.

Recommended Complaints Process

1. Submission of a Complaint

In the event that someone wishes to make a formal complaint, they should submit their complaint in writing to the relevant point of contact. The complaint should provide as much detail as possible, including what took place, when and where, who was involved, the names of any potential witnesses to the incident, and a preferred solution.

2. Acknowledgement

The individual accepting the complaint should acknowledge receipt, requesting any additional information as may be required to make an informed assessment as to its validity. Once a complaint has been accepted, the Club Committee should appoint an individual to investigate the complaint as they see appropriate.

3. Investigation

The Investigating Officer should investigate the details of the complaint. This may include requesting a meeting with the complainant, the subject of the complaint and any other witnesses to gather additional evidence and ensure both sides are considered.

Guidance for Investigating Officers:

- The Investigating Officer must not have any conflict of interest or prior involvement in the case.
- The purpose of the role is to objectively establish the facts of the matter and collect evidence in order to achieve a complete view of the matter.
- Where possible, questions should be as open as possible to allow the interviewee to provide an unfiltered account. Useful open questions to use could be, 'Please take me through the events in your own words giving as much detail as possible'; 'Why did you do/say that?'; 'Were there any witnesses to what happened?'.
- Leading questions (e.g. 'would you agree that...?') should be avoided unless there is no other way of finding an answer to the question.

Once the Investigating Officer believes they have all evidence they should prepare a brief report for the Club Committee providing a factual sequence of events and overview of what has been established. The Investigating Officer should also provide an explanation of what they believe occurred, based on their objective assessment of the evidence, and whether or not they believe there is a case to answer. All statements, emails and any other evidence should be attached to the report.

Where a breach of FA Regulations is identified as part of the investigation process, this should be escalated to the County FA immediately, with both parties informed as such.

4. Outcome

The Club Committee has the power to:

1. Warn as to future conduct;
2. Temporarily suspend an individual from their position (e.g. from Coaching or Playing);
3. Remove an individual from their position within the Club (e.g. as a Coach or Committee member);
4. Revoke or temporarily suspend membership if they do not believe it is in the Club's interest for the individual to remain a member.

Where the Club Committee is looking to take serious action (for example removing someone from their position or from the Club), it is recommended they provide the individual with an opportunity to represent themselves in person at any meeting where this decision will be made.

Once a decision has been made, the decision should be communicated to both parties in writing. Any individual who has action taken against them should have the right of appeal to the Club Committee.

If the complainant is not satisfied with the way the Club has dealt with their complaint, they can refer the matter to the County FA to investigate the process.

Please note, however, that the Surrey FA's Complaints Procedure is in place to allow a review of how the Club have responded to an incident; it is not a re-investigation of the initial case. Clubs and Leagues are independent membership bodies governed by their own internal policies and procedures. It is not the County FA's role to determine who should or should not be granted membership or appointed to a role. We can only review whether such a decision has been made in a fair and appropriate manner, and only when the parties involved have failed to resolve the matter internally and there are no FA regulations in place for redress.

Confidentiality

Clubs must be sensitive to the need to balance confidentiality and discretion with fairness and transparency when investigating complaints.

Although a complainant may request anonymity, this may not be possible in order to fully investigate the complaint – particularly when it relates to a specific incident. Equally, in the interest of fairness, the subject of the complaint should be afforded the right to provide information in their defence and identify if there are any external factors which may have influenced an individual to submit a complaint.

Ultimately, the Club must ensure that the complainant is aware what information will be shared with the subject of the complaint. If it is not possible for the complainant to remain anonymous it must be their decision whether to proceed with, or withdraw, the complaint. This decision must be made prior to the subject of the complaint being made aware a complaint has been submitted against them, and must not impact the standing of either party within the Club.

Once a complaint has been submitted it can be withdrawn at any time. If an investigation has been launched, both parties should be informed that the matter has been closed with no further action being taken, and with no impact on their standing within the Club.