

Relate NI

Compliments, Comments & Complaints Policy & Procedures

The purpose of this policy is to:

- Set out Relate NI's commitment in collecting compliments and comments made by its service users and how to respond
- Provide a process through which anyone seeking to make a complaint can do so easily and for the complaint to be resolved with agreed time made

Introduction

Relate NI provide services to families, individuals, couples, teenagers and children. This includes:

- Counselling
- Talking Therapies
- Training
- Community Liaison
- Partnership working

We pride ourselves in the work we do to support people and getting feedback on what we have done well or what might need to be improved is important to us. Through this policy we seek to demonstrate our commitment to providing high quality services to our clients, customers and

contractors. Relate NI's people understand that accepting compliments and sensitively handling complaints contributes to our overall commitment to seek and use feedback to ensure we are doing what is needed by our clients and to motivate our people to continue to improve the services they offer

This policy has been developed to set out the processes for Relate NI receiving feedback and its methods for response.

Scope

This policy applies to all people who engage with Relate NI services including funders, contractors and importantly end beneficiaries. It also applies to anyone employed by Relate NI or those working on our behalf through Associate contracts.

Aim of the Policy

The aim of the Policy is to:-

- Enable Relate NI service users to better communicate and identify their needs when they are working with our staff in counselling, learning or other services.
- Empower service users by instilling confidence in them and giving them the opportunity to influence and guide how Relate NI provides services to them.
- Demonstrate how Relate NI takes feedback from its service users and how this contributes to improvement.
- Support Relate NI's development by helping the organisation measure the quality of our services and be more responsive to unmet needs.
- Provide the opportunity to address problems when they arise, minimise the adverse effects of things that go wrong and reduce the chances of problems escalating.
- Enhance Relate NI's in fostering a good reputation with its service users, customers and contractors confirming our commitment to excellence.

**employees of Relate NI can speak to their line manager or use supervision as a means of registering any concerns and can invoke the grievance procedure and/or the whistleblowing policy to register any concerns which remain unaddressed at that point.*

Relate's Customer Charter

Anyone wishing to make a comment, compliment or complaint will be:-

- Received in a courteous and caring manner by trained and competent staff;
- Listened to and their wishes respected as far as possible;
- Assured that response time will be kept to an agreed minimum;
- Assured of privacy and confidentiality in the handling of their complaint unless to do so would put at risk other clients/staff or, fail to prevent the commitment of a crime”;
- Provided with a response which is clearly presented, comprehensive and timely;
- Encouraged to comment constructively about the service they have received; and
- Guaranteed that we will strive to continually monitor and enhance the service.

Definition of a Complaint

For the purposes of this Policy a complaint is defined as any action or lack of action by Relate NI that it is claimed does not accord with fair or sound practice and adversely affects the person by whom or on whose behalf the complaint is made.

However, Relate NI also understands that a complaint may be made without an overt statement that it is a complaint. Where this is the case it will be for Relate NI’s management to determine the appropriate policy such matters will be managed within.

Complaints may be made verbally, in writing, by email using the complaint form at Appendix 1 of this policy document.

Definition of a Comment

For the purpose of this policy a comment is defined as any response from our service users, customers or contractors that highlights a way in which a service or approach may be improved, but does not constitute a complaint based on a service experience. Comments can be made verbally, in writing or by email. They will be treated in confidence, collected and reviewed, and will be used when we are undertaking review of processes or tasks when we are undertaking a service review.

Definition of a Compliment

For the purpose of this policy a compliment is defined as positive feedback given by a service user, customer or contractor about an interaction with or service provided by Relate NI. Compliments received will be treated in confidence but if we want to use them to promote our services we will seek permission first.

All service user feedback received whether it is in the form of a compliment, comment or complaint are recorded and reported internally. We only report the substance of the compliment, comment or complaint and not who it was made by.

Making a complaint

When we receive a complaint we will work with the complainant to address the issue and resolve it following written guidelines on the process.

If we can deal with a complaint 'on the spot' we will do so. Service users, customers and contractors should feel able to raise any issue that may give them cause for concern with the immediate member of Relate NI staff they are dealing with; or if they wish may request the contact details of a more senior member of Relate NI staff.

This will require names and contact details of the complainant to be taken. We will record details of the complaint and these will be passed to a member of the Business Operations team. If the complaint is received during an evening or a Saturday morning, details will be passed to the Business Operations team the following working day. We will advise how we deal with complaints and furnish the complainant with a copy of our leaflet.

Complainants will be given the option of making their complaint orally or in writing. If orally, details of their complaint will be recorded by the Relate NI employee, and clarified with the complainant before being processed through.

Relate NI has developed a 'complaints form' that can be emailed or posted to a complainant with instructions to complete and return.

Relate NI will also accept complaints made through email. Anyone wishing to use this option should put the word 'COMPLAINT' in the subject bar and forward their complaint to office@relateni.org.

Relate NI has a number of trained and experienced designated complaints officers within its staff team.

When the complaint is passed through to a designated officer they will review the complaint, and acknowledge receipt with the complainant. If they need further information or clarification from the complainant this will be done as part of the acknowledgement process. The designated officer will undertake the investigation into the complaint which will include talking to the person against whom the complaint has been made and any witnesses that may have been identified.

After reviewing the complaint, talking with the complainant and those involved in the complaint, the designated officer will assess whether the complaint should be upheld or not.

The timescales within the Policy for formal complaints will be adhered to i.e. all formal complaints will be acknowledged in writing within 3 working days with a full written response made available within 20 working days. Where it is not feasible or practical to do so an explanation will be given as to why and a timescale for resolution advised.

Copies of the notes of any meetings involving Relate and complainants will be made available to those involved in accordance with data protection legislation. Where one complainant requires copies of case records and another person is party to these records, consent will be required by all parties before copies of case records will be made available. Where such consent is not forthcoming any information within case notes related to such individuals will be redacted.

Complaints will either be upheld or refused. Where a complaint is upheld and it is the result of service below an acceptable standard from a member of Relate NI staff or a contracted Associate of Relate NI, the investigation may be used as a basis for remedial action to ensure such circumstance is not repeated

Appeal

If a complainant is unhappy with the outcome of their complaint they have the right to appeal. Their appeal can be made on procedural grounds, e.g. the correct procedure was not followed; or where they believe the investigative procedure was not followed, e.g. not all information pertinent to the complaint was gathered or reviewed.

Appeals will be dealt with by a different designated officer to whoever carried out the initial investigation. If a complainant wishes to appeal against a complaint outcome they will be given the contact details of appeal designated officer.

Appeal requests should be made in writing within five working days of the outcome of a complaint and forward to the Business Operations Team. A designated officer will review the appeal, may contact the complainant for clarification and will review the processes undertaken for the complaint. The outcome of the appeal will be provided within 15 working days to the complainant. The outcome will be final.

Relate NI adheres to the standards of a number of professional bodies. Where a complaint is deemed as serious and has been upheld Relate NI will inform the relevant professional body a staff member is aligned to.

Making a Comment

Relate NI welcomes comments on its services. If a service or a process of engagement is not properly explained, this may lead to a service user, customer or contractor making a comment. Whilst not as serious as a complaint, Relate NI is keen to ensure our services and how we deliver them is straightforward, accessible and easy to understand. If a service user, customer or contractor engaging with Relate NI finds this not to be so, we appreciate them commenting to highlight where a service or process could be improved.

We will document all comments made about our services and review them on a quarterly basis. Where service improvement is suggested or identified we will make relevant changes or adjustments to ensure this happens.

Making a Compliment

Compliments are a measure of success and how well our services have been received by service users, customers and contractors. When we received a compliment we celebrate. If the compliment is about an individual within our organisation, we let them know; if it about a service, we will let all those involved in that service know. We will do this through direct contact from a senior manager to the individual or service group. We will also document for reporting purposes when we meet with our Board of Trustees.

People who want to make a compliment can do so verbally when it will be noted and communicated; or in writing or by email to office@relateni.org. We will always acknowledge receiving a compliment and may also contact the individual for further details on what they felt was good about the service they received or their engagement with Relate NI. On occasion we may also seek to use compliments as part of our promotional material, in which case we will always seek consent before doing so.

Roles & Responsibilities

Senior Management Team (including Chief Executive)

The Senior Management Team is ultimately accountable for the management and administration of this Policy and it is their responsibility to ensure that,

- Relate NI has a Policy and procedures in place which enable anyone wishing to provide positive or negative feedback to do so safely
- All formal complaints are dealt with appropriately within the boundaries identified within the Policy
- Systems exist to record and monitor the nature of complaints received and actions taken
- The co-ordination of complaints handling is delegated to an appropriate person/s
- Appropriate support exists for staff who are the subject of complaints
- Any necessary action identified as part of the complaint resolution procedure is put in place and improvement monitored
- Staff are made aware of and understand their responsibilities under the Policy and trained in its operation.

All Staff

It is important that all staff,

- Are fully aware and understand their responsibility for recognising potential complaints as the first point of contact for clients, their relatives/carers and/or advocates.
- Undertake necessary training in the handling of complaints
- Are welcoming of complaints as part of Relate NI's total approach to client care
- Use complaints and comments as a valuable monitor of the quality of their service
- Keep records in the organisational format to allow for complaint monitoring
- Are prepared to learn from the outcome of the complaints procedure to enable their service to become more user sensitive and avoid the occurrence of further complaints

2

The Complainant

The following tasks are not binding with regard to the complainant. They should instead, be used as guidance for Relate to communicate to people wishing to complain. The complainant will receive more effective responses to the complaint where they:

- Co-operate with Relate NI in seeking a solution to the complaint;
- express the complaint in full as early as possible;
- respond promptly to requests for information or meetings or in agreeing the details of the complaint;
- ask the designated complaints co-ordinator for assistance as needed
- treat all those involved in the complaint with respect.

Support for the Complainant in the Complaints Procedure

Any complainant seeking external support during the complaints process should be provided with independent and confidential information, advice, representation and support.

This external support may be the individual's social worker, CPN, other health and social care professional etc, parent/partner, another significant adult or a friend. Every attempt should be made to facilitate this support for the complainant.

The role of any external support in the complaints procedure is:

- to empower the person(s) by enabling him/her to express his/her views wishes or feelings, or by speaking on his/her behalf;
- to seek the resolution of any problems or concerns identified by the person(s) by working in partnership with them and only with his/her agreement;
- to support the person(s) pursuing a complaint through every stage of the complaints procedure and to provide him/her with information

about his rights and options, helping him/her clarify the complaint and the outcomes he/she is seeking; and

- to speak for or represent the person(s) at any stage of the complaints process, including at the informal stage or at any formal hearing or interviews.

Employee Support

As an employer Relate NI has a duty of care to its employees – the following is in place to support an employee who is the subject of a complaint:

1. Managers

Employees should be supported throughout the complaints process by their line manager. If they feel they are not receiving the support they need, and this may not always be possible if their manager is involved in carrying out an investigation involving them, they may seek help and support from an alternative manager.

2. Employee Assistance Programme

Relate NI has an Employee Assistance Programme that can be accessed by staff for advice and support. Relate NI also has policies in place to support employee wellbeing and these will be engaged to support employees who are the subject of complaints and other investigations.

Complaints from Young People

Legislation designed to protect young people and regulate the behaviour of those who come into contact with them requires Relate NI to establish a procedure for considering any representations, including any complaints made to it by:-

- Any child who is currently accessing or has accessed Relate NI's services in the past
- A parent of his/hers/theirs
- Any person who is not a parent of his/hers/theirs but who has parental responsibility for him/her/them e.g. foster carer, HSC Trust etc.
- Such other person as Relate NI considers has a sufficient interest in the child's welfare to warrant his/her representations being considered by Relate NI about the discharge of Relate NI of any of its functions under the legislation in relation to the child.

When the young person engages with a Relate NI service, the relevant individual(s) will be given written information on how to access the

complaints procedure and made aware through the public placing of posters of the appropriate contact person in this regard.

Relate NI should always check with the child (subject to his/her/their understanding) that:-

- A complaint submitted reflects his/her/their views
- He/she/they wish the person submitting the complaint to act on his/her/their behalf

Where it is determined that the person making the complaint is not acting on behalf of the child that person may still be eligible to have the complaint considered if, after consultation with the referring authority, it is determined that the individual has sufficient interest in the child's welfare to justify their own representation being made.

Submission of Complaints

Those mentioned above may register complaints about:-

- Services provided by Relate NI to a child
- Processes involved in the denial of a service(s)
- The impact of the application of a Relate NI policy on a child

The complaints procedure does not apply when:

- The person wishing to complain does not meet the requirements of "who may complain" and is not acting on behalf of such an individual;
- The complaint is not in relation to the actions or decisions of Relate NI, or of any body acting on its behalf; or
- The same complaint has already been dealt with at all stages of the procedure.

Relate NI in liaison with the referring agency have discretion in deciding whether to consider complaints where to do so would prejudice any of the following concurrent investigations:

- Court proceedings;
- Tribunals;
- Disciplinary proceedings; or
- Criminal proceedings.

If a decision is reached not to consider or further consider complaints subject to these concurrent investigations, Relate NI will write to the complainant explaining the reason for this decision and specify the relevant concurrent investigation.

Once the concurrent investigation has been concluded the complainant may resubmit their complaint to Relate NI as long as it is within one year of the

conclusion of the concurrent investigation.

Procedure for the Resolution of Complaints from Young People

Young people must be given clear written information about how to make a complaint, how the complaint will be investigated and by whom, the timescale and the feedback process. The information must be young person friendly and available within Relate NI's facilities both on posters and leaflets.

Relate NI will accept complaints from children, young people or appropriate others as outlined above verbally or in writing, including electronically.

All allegations of ill treatment, physical, sexual or emotional abuse will be dealt with under Relate NI's Child Protection Policy and not the Complaints Procedure. If a staff member is not clear about the status of a particular complaint they must always seek management advice immediately and ensure the young person is aware they are doing so.

Where a complaint is made to a member of staff, line management should be informed as soon as possible so that the complaint can be recorded and progress monitored. Particular attention is drawn to the need to ensure that any personal information obtained in relation to a complaint is only used for that purpose in compliance with data protection legislation.

On receipt of a complaint information (which is child and young person friendly and appropriate to the age and understanding of the child) on how to access Relate NI's Complaints Procedure will be issued by the person receiving the complaint. This should include information about independent and confidential support services and how to access them. It should be remembered that there may be no need to engage the complaints procedure if the matter is resolved immediately

Where external support is provided to a young person making a complaint, Relate NI will ensure that the person providing this support is acting with the informed consent of the young person and should not rely on the person providing this support to ensure the child or young person understands the procedure.

This external support may be a Trust social worker, other health and social care professional etc, a parent, significant adult, a friend or other young person. Every attempt should be made to facilitate this support for the young person unless it is apparent that a conflict of interest exists/may exist.

Relate will also consider how to meet the varying needs of complainants, particularly those whose first language is not English and those with communication difficulties.

Where appropriate for staff and with agreement from the child or young person making the complaint, Relate NI may arrange for conciliation, mediation or other services to help resolve matters.

All formal complaints will be acknowledged in writing within 3 working days with a full written response made available within 20 working days. Where it is not feasible or practical to do so an explanation will be given as to why and a revised timescale for resolution advised.

Complaints received from children or young people will be dealt with under the same procedures as outlined from page 11 to page 13 under the section headed 'Protocols for Action'.

Problem Solving and Resolution

Solving the problems that generate complaints should be at the forefront of Relate NI's approach to responding to children and young people. Involving people and agencies in the community who provide independent advice can assist problem solving and may prevent dissatisfaction developing into complaints.

Staff should consider when an unresolved problem becomes a complaint. It is important to ensure that attempts at problem solving are not to be used to divert an eligible person from making a complaint under the statutory procedure.

Attempts at resolution should not end once a complaint has been made. Rather, there should be continued efforts to resolve the dissatisfaction of children and young people so that the matter complained about is resolved during consideration of the complaint. Relate NI should also consider introducing alternative ways of resolving the complaint while any given stage is ongoing.

In any case, resolution should be in the best interest of the child concerned, particularly if an adult has complained about the children's services, but not on the child's behalf.

There are a number of methods of resolution that do not require a full investigation that can be applied, including:

- the provision of an apology or explanation;
- conciliation and mediation;
- a reassessment of the children or young person's needs;
- practical action specific to the particular complainant;
- a review of practice; and/or
- an assurance that Relate NI will monitor the effectiveness of its remedy.

Vexatious Complaints

Despite Relate NI's best efforts some complaints cannot be resolved to everyone's satisfaction. A small number of people find it difficult to stop complaining and where Relate reasonably believe a complaint has become unhelpful to the complainant and Relate the Chief Executive will write a closing letter to the complainant to this effect.

Time Limits for Making Complaints

Relate NI is not required to consider complaints made more than one year after the grounds to make the representation arose. In these cases, Relate NI's Head of Business Operations should write to advise the complainant that their complaint cannot be considered and explaining the reasons why he/she has adopted this position.

However, decisions need to be made by Relate NI's Senior Management Team on a case by case basis and there should generally be a presumption in favour of accepting the complaint unless there is good reason not to accept it.

Though not exclusive, possible grounds for accepting a complaint made after one year are:-

- genuine issues of vulnerability
- Relate NI believes that there is still benefit to the complainant in proceeding
- there is likely to be sufficient access to information or individuals involved at the time, to enable an effective and fair investigation to be carried out; and/or
- action should be taken in light of human rights-based legislation.

The time limit can be extended at Relate NI's discretion if it is still possible to consider the representations effectively and efficiently. Relate NI may also wish to consider such complaints if it would be unreasonable to expect the complainant to have made the complaint earlier. For example, where the child was not able to make the complaint or did not feel confident in bringing it forward in the one-year time limit.

Record Keeping

A written record of the complaint must be kept on Relate NI's complaints file – this is managed by the Business Operations Team. This record should include copies of all communication with the complainant(s), the outcome of investigations, action taken and the level of the complainant's satisfaction with the outcome.

A systematic audit of complaints received should be carried out annually (or sooner if considered necessary due to the level/nature of complaints received) to identify recurring issues and to put in place mechanisms which use this information to improve the quality of service delivered.

Any annual monitoring reports required by funding/regulatory bodies should provide information on the number and sources of complaints received and show clear evidence of Relate NI's action to address those complaints.

Complaint information will be retained in line with Relate NI's Information and Records Retention policy.