



## **The Woodland Ways Complaints Policy**

### **1 Policy**

Our policy is to welcome all complaints, to investigate them fully and resolve them wherever possible.

### **2 The definition of a complaint**

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction, whether justified or not, about Woodland Ways' policy or actions.

A complaint can be received verbally, by phone, by email or in writing. It can be from outside Woodland Ways or from a member or trustee.

Complaints arrangements do not cover:

- requests for information or explanation of policy and practice;
- matters for which there is a separate procedure, for example, Borough Council determination of our planning applications.

### **3 Why we have a complaints procedure**

Complaints, if handled properly, can lead to better working relationships with our partners and customers. To help achieve this, our complaints procedure lets people know that they can complain; that we will consider their concerns fairly and objectively; and that, where possible, we will resolve them. Complaints are also a form of market research. They can tell us where we are meeting our objectives, if our objectives are appropriate, whether there are areas where we have no objectives but where it might be appropriate to have some, or where we need to change the way we work more generally.

### **4 Monitoring and learning from complaints**

So as to learn from complaints and to show that we are following these procedures we need to record complaints, which we do in a complaints log kept by the Secretary. At the end of each financial year this information is analysed, summarised and presented to the Steering Group along with recommendations if appropriate.

As the volume of complaints is low this annual reporting is considered appropriate.

The Steering Group wants to be assured that trustees are using the complaints procedure and are dealing with complaints received in a fair and professional way.

The Steering Group is also looking for trends in the nature of complaints received. Are we having difficulties with a particular group of external contacts? Is there a need for us to change the way we operate in a particular area of our work? And if the answer to any of these questions is "yes", are we taking the necessary action?

Any complaints of wide interest to our members will be discussed at our AGM, or if necessary at an EGM, so members can advise the trustees on the appropriate course of action.

## **5 Who handles complaints**

Our complaints procedure has four steps - three internal and one external. The intention is that most complaints will be resolved at stage one and the rest at stage two.

### **Stage one**

In most cases the complaint should be resolved by the individual responsible for the area of work being complained about.

### **Stage two**

If the complainant feels that the problem has not been satisfactorily resolved, they can contact the Chair.

### **Stage three**

If the complainant is still unhappy with Woodland Ways' response they can ask for the complaint to be discussed at the next trustees meeting. The trustees may at their discretion discuss the complaint at the next AGM or at an EGM.

### **Stage four**

If the complainant is still unhappy with Woodland Ways' response they can ask Green Light Trust, to which Woodland Ways is affiliated, to investigate and advise both parties.

### **External Stage**

The complainant can complain to the Charity Commission at any stage.

## **6 Getting the complaint to the right person in Woodland Ways**

Complaints made in writing should be passed to the relevant person identified in the previous table. Complaints made by telephone or through personal contact can be received at a number of points, sometimes far removed from the 'source' of the complaint. In these cases the recipient of the complaint should:

- note the facts of the complaint;
- take the complainant's name, address and telephone number;
- tell the complainant that we have a complaints procedure;
- tell the complainant what will happen next;

- complete the first four sections of the complaints monitoring form;
- pass this information on to the relevant person within one working week.

## **7 Timetable**

Complaints must be acknowledged by the person handling the complaint within a week. The acknowledgement should say who is dealing with the complaint and when the person complaining can expect a reply. A copy of our complaints procedure should be attached.

To meet our standards, complainants should receive a definitive reply within four weeks. If this is not possible because for example, an investigation has not been fully completed, a progress report should be sent with an indication of when a full reply will be given.

## **8 Replying to the complaint (stage 1)**

Whether the complaint is justified or not the reply to the complainant should describe the action taken to investigate the complaint, the conclusions from the investigation, and any action taken as a result of the complaint.

All replies should set out the procedure to be followed if the complainant is unhappy with Woodland Ways' response.

## **Remedies**

If the complaint is found to be justified consider what can be done to re-establish goodwill.

What is appropriate will vary from case to case. Do

Apologise (don't be grudging);

Explain what has been done to investigate the complaint, the findings, and what action has been taken as a result. This could include:

- putting right what has gone wrong;
- an assurance that the situation will be put right;
- a change in procedures;
- an assurance that this will not happen again;
- to them or anyone else.

You could also consider:

- a visit from a trustee;
- a gesture of goodwill e.g. offer a guided tour on a woodland

## **8.1 Recording complaints**

The complaints record should be completed.

## **9 Stage two complaints - complaints that are taken further**

Should the complainant decide to take matters further and contact the Chair, that individual should:

- Acknowledge receipt of the request within five working days of receiving it. The acknowledgement should confirm that the Chair will deal with the case and say when the complainant can expect a reply. Complainants should receive a reply within 20 working days. If this is not possible a progress report should be sent with an indication of when a full reply will be given;
- Keep the person who dealt with the original complaint, at stage one, informed of what is happening;
- Investigate the facts of the case. This may involve reviewing the paperwork of the case and speaking with the person who dealt with the complaint at stage one.

### **9.1 Replying to the complainant (Stage two complaints)**

The procedure is very similar to stage 1 complaints.

The reply should describe what has been done to investigate the complaint, the conclusions drawn from the investigation, and the action taken as a result of the investigation.

Should the Chair disagree with the findings of the original investigation the letter of reply should say so. Woodland Ways should apologise and where possible say what is being done to ensure that the problem does not happen again.

All replies should set out the procedure to follow if the complainant is unhappy with Woodland Ways' response i.e. give them the name and contact details of the person in accordance with Stage 3 of the process.

### **9.2 Recording Stage two complaints**

The action taken needs to be recorded in the complaints log held by the team where the complaint originated.

## **10 Stage three complaints**

Repeat steps under stage two complaints. Whatever the outcome the reply should set out the process for taking the complaint further, i.e. if the complainant does not feel that the issue has been resolved satisfactorily they may ask for advice from Green Light Trust (The

Foundry, Bury Road, Lawshall, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP29 4PJ, tel 01284 830829; website address: [www.greenlighttrust.org](http://www.greenlighttrust.org)).

### **10.1 Recording Stage three complaints**

Stage three complaints need to be recorded on the complaints monitoring form and linked with the stage one and two records. Three records should be kept in the team where the complaint originated.

### **11 Guidelines for handling complaints about the Chair or trustees**

Woodland Ways must take complaints about the Chair or trustees seriously and ensure they are properly investigated in a fair and open way.

### **12 Who handles complaints about the Chair or Trustees**

If the complaint is about the Chair, the vice-Chair (or if the vice Chair is not available, the Secretary or Treasurer) will manage the complaint through the four stages as set out above, in place of the Chair.

If the complaint is about the trustees generally, the Chair will manage the complaint through the four stages with the expectation that Green Light Trust will be asked to advise. These stages must be expedited swiftly so that there is no suspicion that the trustees are failing to deal with a complaint about themselves.

### **13 Keeping a balance**

Woodland Ways does not receive many complaints, so this policy needs to be seen in that context. There may be times when someone does not want to go as far as to make a complaint but they do have suggestions or comments about how things could be done better. Woodland Ways will be receptive to these and act upon them where possible.

### **14 Complaining to the Charity Commission.**

The following text in italics is from the Charity Commission's website, and explains their policy for accepting complaints about charities.

We will look into complaints against charities:  
where concerns are expressed about serious mismanagement, for example involving a failure to observe the requirements of charity law; and  
where there is harm, or the risk of harm, and the use of the Commission's powers is proportionate to it; or  
where there is clear evidence of deliberate abuse.

The Commission will not investigate every type of complaint involving a charity. We will not do so:

- where the complainant is simply disagreeing with a decision which the charity, as a free and independent body, has taken within the law and the powers in its constitution;
- to resolve internal disagreements over a charity's policy or strategy which those involved should be responsible for resolving themselves;
- to take up individual complaints of poor service from a charity where there is no general risk to its services, its clients or its resources; or
- where the complainant is being dealt with, or is the responsibility of, another statutory or supervisory body.

We think of harm as:

- detrimental effects on the people or causes the charity serves;
- loss or misuse of significant assets or resources;
- damage to the public reputation of a charity or charities generally; and
- damage to public confidence in charity regulation.

People are free to complain to the Charity Commission at any time about Woodland Ways' charitable activities. However, Woodland Ways would prefer the opportunity to resolve issues with the complainant beforehand, as many complaints can be resolved without the need to involve the Charity Commission.