



Putting Things Right  
Complaints Policy

## Policy Version Control

Status	Version	Date	Description of Changes
Draft	V0.1	18/11/2025	First Draft of Document
Approved	V1.0	22/11/2025	Minor Adjustments after Executive Committee Scrutiny
Approved	V2.0	16/06/2026	Reviewed. No Changes.

# Putting Things Right: Complaints Policy

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# Putting Things Right: Complaints Policy

ASPE is committed to integrity, professionalism, and respect across its activities, including research, publications, events, partnerships, and member engagement. This Complaints Policy sets out a clear staged process for raising, considering, and resolving concerns in a manner that is fair, proportionate, and accessible. The Executive Committee oversees and determines all complaints, ensuring impartial decisions aligned with ASPE's values and a culture of learning and improvement.

## Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this policy is to provide a transparent pathway for handling complaints so that concerns are heard, investigated, and resolved consistently and respectfully. It describes what constitutes a complaint, who may raise one, the stages by which a complaint is managed, and how outcomes and learning are captured. The policy applies to complaints about ASPE's activities, decisions, services, publications, events, communications, and conduct within ASPE contexts. It does not replace legal processes or employment procedures, nor is it intended to adjudicate purely academic disagreements without procedural or conduct concerns. Complaints may be raised by members, partners, authors and reviewers, suppliers, event participants, and members of the public who have interacted with ASPE. Matters already in litigation, employment grievances, requests made under data protection law, or incidents outside ASPE's remit will be redirected to appropriate processes.

ASPE recognises that complaints can arise from misunderstandings, errors, or more significant concerns about standards. By clarifying responsibilities and expectations, the policy aims to minimise confusion and ensure that complaints are handled thoroughly and respectfully. ASPE welcomes clear, evidence-informed submissions and is committed to proportionate investigation and timely communication throughout.

## Guiding Principles

ASPE's approach is guided by fairness, respect, confidentiality, timeliness, accessibility, accountability, and learning. Complaints are considered impartially and proportionately, with decisions based on evidence and clear reasoning. All parties are expected to engage professionally, and personal information is handled confidentially on a need-to-know basis. Timely communication is essential to trust; ASPE sets indicative timeframes and provides updates if delays occur. Accessibility is supported through reasonable adjustments to remove barriers to participation. Accountability is upheld through Executive Committee oversight, recorded decisions, and periodic review of anonymised learning. ASPE affirms that raising a complaint must not lead to adverse treatment of the complainant.

## Definitions and Responsibilities

A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction with ASPE's actions, decisions, conduct, or standards where a response or remedy is sought. The complainant is the individual or organisation raising the concern. The respondent is the person or ASPE function named in the complaint. Investigation refers to proportionate information gathering to establish facts and reach findings. The outcome is the decision and any remedy, actions, or recommendations.

The Executive Committee owns this policy and determines outcomes. The Chair ensures impartial allocation, manages conflicts of interest, and authorises decisions and communications. The Secretariat receives complaints, acknowledges them, logs them, and supports communications and documentation. Where appropriate, a small sub-group may be appointed to investigate and provide findings, with the final decision resting with the full Executive Committee. All parties are expected to cooperate respectfully, provide information promptly, and maintain confidentiality throughout.

## How to Raise a Complaint

Complaints should be submitted in writing by email or letter and marked "Confidential – Complaint". Submissions should set out the nature of the concern, relevant dates, the individuals or functions involved, the impact, and the remedy sought, and should include any available evidence such as documents or correspondence. Complaints should be sent to [complaints@aspe.org.uk](mailto:complaints@aspe.org.uk). Anonymous complaints will be considered, although investigation may be limited if identity is necessary to verify facts or to provide an effective remedy. Complaints should normally be raised within three months of the incident or decision; the Executive Committee may accept later complaints where there are compelling reasons, such as newly available evidence or safeguarding considerations. ASPE offers reasonable adjustments where writing presents a barrier, ensuring the process remains accessible.

## Stage 1: Receipt, Acknowledgment, and Logging

Upon receipt, the Secretariat acknowledges the complaint promptly, normally within five working days, and ensures it is logged for record-keeping. The complaint undergoes an initial review of scope, completeness, and urgency. This review considers whether the complaint falls within the policy's remit and whether immediate measures are required, including safeguarding, data protection, or reputational risk. If further information is necessary to understand the issues, timelines, or parties involved, the complainant is invited to provide clarification. Where a complaint concerns a member of the Executive Committee, that individual is recused from all stages to preserve impartiality. If a complaint is not within scope, the Secretariat explains the reasons and provides guidance on alternative processes or external routes.

## Stage 2: Planning and Information Gathering

Following acknowledgment and initial review, ASPE will develop a proportionate investigation plan. This may include reviewing relevant documentation, conducting interviews, consulting ASPE functions, and inviting a response from the person or function named in the complaint. The respondent receives a fair summary of the issues and an opportunity to present their account and evidence. Where necessary, interim measures may be taken to manage risks, such as pausing decisions, adjusting roles in an event, or limiting access to specific functions while facts are established. Throughout information gathering, ASPE prioritises transparency and balance, ensuring that both complainant and respondent can address factual matters and that only necessary personal information is collected. The aim is to establish a reliable picture of events so the Executive Committee can assess the merits of the complaint and consider appropriate remedies. ASPE aims to complete planning and information gathering within ten working days wherever practicable, recognising that complexity may require more time.

## Stage 3: Consideration and Determination

Once information has been gathered, a designated sub-group may draft findings for consideration by the Executive Committee. The Committee reviews the findings, weighs the evidence, and decides on the outcome. A complaint may be upheld in full or in part where concerns are substantiated, not upheld where the evidence does not support the claim, or deemed out of scope where matters extend beyond the policy's remit. Decisions are guided by fairness, proportionality, and clarity. Where a complaint is upheld, the Executive Committee determines remedies commensurate with the issue, which may include a formal apology, corrections to publications or communications, amendments to decisions, updates to policies or procedures, training, restorative steps such as facilitated conversation, practical redress for event or service issues, and safeguarding or data protection actions as required. Remedies aim to address immediate concerns and underlying causes, ensuring learning translates into improved practice.

## Stage 4: Outcome Communication and Next Steps

ASPE communicates the outcome in writing, normally within five working days of the decision. The outcome letter explains the decision, reasons, evidence considered, and any actions or timelines associated with remedies. It also sets out how to request reconsideration, including the grounds and timeframe for doing so. Communications are handled sensitively and confidentially, using clear and plain language so parties understand the findings and implications. Where appropriate, ASPE includes information about actions already undertaken and those that will be completed by specified deadlines, and may indicate external options available to the complainant.

## Stage 5: Reconsideration and Appeal

If a complainant remains dissatisfied after the initial decision, they may request reconsideration on specific grounds. Reconsideration is intended to address procedural irregularity that may have affected the outcome, new evidence that was not previously available and could change the findings, or concerns about the proportionality of the remedy. Requests should normally be made within ten working days of the outcome letter, unless there are compelling reasons for an extension. The Executive Committee reviews the matter afresh with reference to the stated grounds, and a different sub-group may be appointed to ensure impartiality. The final decision after reconsideration is communicated in writing and is final within ASPE.

## Confidentiality, Data Protection, and Record-Keeping

ASPE handles complaint information confidentially and shares details only with individuals directly involved in managing the case. Reports to the Executive Committee contain the minimum personal data necessary for decision-making. All records are

processed lawfully, securely, and proportionately, with enhanced protection for sensitive information and limited access to authorised personnel. Complaint records are retained for a defined period consistent with legal requirements and ASPE's retention schedule, after which they are disposed of securely.

## Conflicts of Interest and Impartiality

ASPE requires Executive Committee members and any investigators to declare actual or perceived conflicts of interest, including personal relationships, involvement in the events in question, or competing interests. Conflicted individuals are recused from information access, discussion, and decision-making for the case.

If a complaint is against the Chair, the Vice Chair will lead the process to ensure impartiality and proper oversight. If a complaint is against both the Chair and the Vice Chair, ASPE's Secretariat will conduct the investigation, reporting findings to the Executive Committee for determination.

The complainant is informed when recusal or alternative leadership occurs and how impartiality is maintained. This approach safeguards the integrity of the process and ensures decisions are based on evidence and reasoned judgement, free from undue influence. ASPE recognises that confidence in the complaints process depends on both the reality and the perception of impartiality, and it therefore addresses declarations of interest consistently and at the earliest opportunity.

External investigators will be used where impartiality, expertise or stakeholder confidence require independent examination. The criteria for these external investigators will be decided by the nature of the complaint.

## Safeguarding and Serious Concerns

Where complaints indicate risk of harm to children or vulnerable adults, ASPE prioritises protective measures and engages appropriate safeguarding processes immediately. This policy should be read alongside ASPE's safeguarding policy and whistleblowing policy.

The Executive Committee may need to refer matters to statutory bodies or partner organisations where duties require it. Safeguarding or legal processes may run alongside the complaints procedure, which may affect timelines. ASPE communicates clearly about any such impacts and takes steps to protect confidentiality, safety, and the integrity of investigations. Serious concerns, including data breaches or significant reputational risks, are addressed promptly with proportionate measures, early risk assessment, and interim actions that mitigate harm while facts are established.

## Malicious, Vexatious, or Persistent Complaints

ASPE distinguishes between persistent pursuit of legitimate concerns and conduct that is malicious or vexatious. Complaints may be considered vexatious where they involve harassment, abusive language, repeated unfounded allegations, unreasonable demands, or refusal to accept documented findings. In such circumstances, ASPE may set clear boundaries, consolidate issues to avoid duplication, and restrict contact routes to protect trustees, volunteers, and members while maintaining efficiency. Any designation of a complaint as vexatious requires Executive Committee approval and a written rationale. Legitimate concerns will not be dismissed because communications are frustrated or emotionally charged; ASPE focuses on substance and evidence and maintains professional engagement throughout.

## Accessibility and Reasonable Adjustments

ASPE seeks to ensure inclusive access to the complaints process. Reasonable adjustments are available for disability, language, or other needs, including alternative communication methods, extended timeframes where justified, and accessible formats such as large print or plain English summaries. Complainants may nominate a representative or support person to assist them, with consent clearly recorded and privacy obligations respected. Accessibility provisions aim to remove barriers while preserving the integrity and efficiency of the process, and the Executive Committee and Secretariat will discuss adjustments with individuals to identify practical solutions that enable full engagement.

## Communication Standards and Transparency

Professional and respectful communication underpins effective complaint handling. ASPE uses clear, plain language in requests for information, updates, and outcome letters, and avoids jargon wherever possible. Where communications become abusive or hostile, engagement may be paused, boundaries explained, and contact resumed once standards are met. Transparency is upheld by clear explanations of decisions and actions, acknowledgment and correction of errors, and periodic sharing of anonymised learning to support improvement and accountability. These practices reinforce confidence in the process and demonstrate ASPE's commitment to continual refinement.

### Learning, Improvement, and Governance Oversight

ASPE views complaints as an opportunity to learn and improve. The Executive Committee reviews completed cases to identify themes, process gaps, and opportunities for training or policy enhancement. Actions arising from complaints are tracked with responsible leads and deadlines, and progress is monitored to completion.

### External Escalation to the Charity Commission

If, after ASPE's reconsideration stage has concluded, a complainant remains dissatisfied, they may raise their concerns with the Charity Commission for England and Wales. The Commission is the independent regulator of charities and considers serious regulatory matters, such as concerns about governance, mismanagement, risk to charitable assets, compliance with legal duties, or issues affecting public trust and the charity's ability to deliver public benefit. It does not generally adjudicate individual service complaints or interpersonal disputes, but may investigate where concerns indicate potential breaches of trustees' legal responsibilities or systemic risk within a charity. Complainants should set out clearly why they believe the matter raises regulatory concerns suitable for the Charity Commission, providing relevant information and evidence. ASPE will cooperate with lawful requests from the Commission and any related regulatory processes, while maintaining confidentiality and data protection standards.



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