

# COMPLAINTS HANDLING POLICY AND PROCEDURE [GOV04]

## Statement

ACOLA is committed to handling all complaints and concerns fairly, transparently and promptly.

ACOLA welcomes feedback and complaints as an important source of information that helps the organisation improve its governance, services and activities.

This Policy and Procedure applies to all external complaints, that is, concerns raised by members, stakeholders, partners, funders, participants or members of the public about ACOLA's conduct, governance, services or activities. It also provides the procedural framework for safeguarding and child safety complaints referred under ACOLA's Safeguarding Policy and Child Safety Policy.

This Policy is distinct from ACOLA's Grievance Resolution Policy and Procedure, which governs internal workplace disputes between ACOLA personnel. Where a concern is raised through the wrong channel, ACOLA will redirect the person to the appropriate process.

This Policy should be read in conjunction with the following Policies:

- Child Safety Policy [GOV02]
- Safeguarding Policy [GOV03]
- Code of Conduct [HR01]
- Privacy Policy [GOV05]
- Whistleblower Policy [GOV06]
- Grievance Resolution Policy and Procedure [HR04].

## Scope

This Policy applies to all complaints received from external parties about ACOLA's conduct, governance, services, activities, personnel, events, online platforms or funded partners.

This Policy does not apply to:

- internal workplace grievances between ACOLA personnel, which are governed by the Grievance Resolution Policy and Procedure, or
- whistleblower disclosures, which are governed by the Whistleblower Policy, noting that a complaint may also constitute a protected disclosure and both policies may apply concurrently.

## Definitions

**Complaint** means any expression of dissatisfaction about ACOLA's conduct, governance, services, activities, personnel, events, or funded partners, where a response or resolution is expected or sought.

**Complainant** means any person who makes a complaint under this Policy, including members, stakeholders, partners, funders, participants or members of the public.

**Complaints Officer** means the person designated by ACOLA to receive and manage complaints under this Policy.

**Safeguarding complaint** means a complaint or concern that a person has been, or is at risk of being, subjected to abuse, neglect, or exploitation in connection with ACOLA's activities, as defined in the Safeguarding Policy.

**Child safety complaint** means a complaint or concern that a child has been, or is at risk of being, subjected to abuse, neglect, or exploitation in connection with ACOLA's activities, as defined in the Child Safety Policy.

**Responsible Person** has the meaning given in the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth).

## Complaints Officer

ACOLA designates a Complaints Officer responsible for receiving, triaging and coordinating the resolution of complaints under this Policy.

Complaints Officer: Diana Melham, Company Secretary

- Email: [confidential@acola.org.au](mailto:confidential@acola.org.au)
- Post: GPO Box 783 CANBERRA ACT 2601 (marked 'CONFIDENTIAL')
- Phone: +61 0412 605 129

Where the Complaints Officer is the subject of a complaint, the complaint should be made directly to the CEO or Board Chair.

Where a complaint relates to the CEO, it should be made directly to the Board Chair.

Where a complaint relates to the Board Chair or a Board member, it should be made directly to the CEO, who will refer it to the full Board.

## How to Make a Complaint

Complaints may be made:

- by email: [confidential@acola.org.au](mailto:confidential@acola.org.au)
- by phone: +61 0412 605 129
- in writing: addressed to the Complaints Officer at GPO Box 783 CANBERRA ACT 2601
- in person: by arrangement with the Complaints Officer, and

Complaints may be made anonymously. ACOLA will take all complaints seriously regardless of whether the complainant identifies themselves, noting that anonymous complaints may limit ACOLA's ability to investigate fully or provide feedback on the outcome.

Where a complainant requires assistance to make a complaint (for example, due to disability, language or other accessibility needs), ACOLA will take reasonable steps to accommodate that need, including by accepting complaints through a support person or representative.

## Complaint Streams

### Stream 1: General complaints

Concerns about ACOLA's governance, services, activities, communications, events or the conduct of ACOLA personnel that do not involve allegations of abuse, neglect, exploitation or harm to a person.

Examples: dissatisfaction with a membership service, concerns about a Board decision, feedback about an event, concerns about ACOLA's public communications.

### Stream 2: Safeguarding complaints (adults)

Concerns that a person (other than a child) has been, or is at risk of being, subjected to abuse, neglect or exploitation in connection with ACOLA's activities, as defined in the Safeguarding Policy.

Examples: allegations of financial exploitation of a vulnerable adult participant, concerns about the conduct of a contractor toward a vulnerable stakeholder.

### Stream 3: Child safety complaints

Concerns that a child has been, or is at risk of being, subjected to abuse, neglect or exploitation in connection with ACOLA's activities, as defined in the Child Safety Policy.

Examples: concerns about the conduct of an ACOLA representative toward a child at an event, concerns about a funded partner's child safety practices.

The Complaints Officer will determine the appropriate stream at the triage stage. A complaint may engage more than one stream and will be managed accordingly.

## Procedure

### Step 1: Immediate safety

If a complaint involves an immediate risk to the safety of any person, the person who becomes aware of the concern must contact emergency services (000) immediately, before making an internal report.

### Step 2: Receipt and acknowledgement

The Complaints Officer will:

- record the complaint in the Complaints Register upon receipt, and
- acknowledge receipt of the complaint to the complainant within three business days, where the complainant has identified themselves.

The acknowledgement will confirm that the complaint has been received, identify the Complaints Officer as the point of contact and provide an indicative timeframe for the next steps.

### Step 3: Triage and initial assessment

Within five business days of receipt, the Complaints Officer will conduct an initial assessment to determine:

- which complaint stream applies (Stream 1, 2, or 3)
- whether the complaint involves an immediate or ongoing risk to any person's safety requiring urgent action
- whether mandatory reporting obligations apply under applicable state or territory law (Streams 2 and 3)
- whether the complaint should be referred to an external authority (police, child protection services, the ACNC or another regulator)
- whether an internal investigation is warranted
- what interim measures, if any, are appropriate to protect the safety of any person involved, and
- whether the complaint falls outside the scope of this Policy and should be redirected (for example, to the Grievance Resolution Policy and Procedure or the Whistleblower Policy).

The Complaints Officer will document the outcome of the triage assessment in the Complaints Register.

### Step 4: Mandatory and external reporting

#### A. Mandatory Reporting (Streams 2 and 3)

Where a complaint involves a child or vulnerable adult and the Complaints Officer or another ACOLA personnel member is a mandatory reporter under applicable state or territory law, the mandatory reporter must notify the relevant child protection or adult safeguarding authority. This obligation exists independently of any internal process and must not be delayed.

Relevant authorities include:

- ACT (children): ACT Child and Youth Protection Services 1300 556 729 (business hours) or 13 20 44 (after hours)
- ACT (adults): ACT Disability, Aged and Carer Advocacy Service (ADACAS) 02 6242 5060
- NSW (children): NSW Child Protection Helpline 13 21 11 (24 hours)
- NSW (adults): NSW Ageing and Disability Abuse Helpline 1800 628 221
- VIC (children): Child Protection (area-based intake, business hours) or the After Hours Child Protection Emergency Service 13 12 78
- All jurisdictions (adults): where no dedicated statutory adult safeguarding body exists, the National Disability Abuse and Neglect Hotline 1800 880 052, 1800 ELDERHelp 1800 353 374, or police on 000 for immediate risk.

#### B. Reporting to Police

Where a complaint involves conduct that may constitute a criminal offence, the Complaints Officer will notify the Australian Federal Police (ACT) or the relevant state or territory police force.

### **C. Reporting to the ACNC**

Where a complaint indicates a serious breach of ACNC Governance Standards or involves significant harm, the Complaints Officer will notify the ACNC in accordance with ACOLA's obligations as a registered charity.

ACOLA acknowledges that, following amendments to the *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth) effective 5 December 2025, the ACNC Commissioner may publicly disclose that an investigation is underway or information relating to an investigation in certain circumstances.

### **D. Reporting to Funders**

Where ACOLA's funding agreements require notification of incidents, the Complaints Officer will notify the relevant funder in accordance with those requirements.

### **Step 5: Investigation**

Where an internal investigation is warranted, the Complaints Officer will:

- appoint an investigator (internal or external) who is independent of the subject of the complaint
- notify the subject of the complaint that an investigation is underway and provide them with a reasonable opportunity to respond
- gather relevant information, including documents, records and witness accounts
- maintain strict confidentiality throughout the investigation, disclosing information only to those who need it to manage the complaint or comply with legal obligations
- complete the investigation as promptly as practicable, and
- prepare a written investigation report setting out findings and recommended actions.

For Stream 3 (child safety) complaints involving a partner organisation, the investigation process will be adapted as appropriate, including by requiring the partner to conduct its own investigation and report findings to ACOLA.

### **Step 6: Outcome and feedback**

Following the investigation, the Complaints Officer will:

- brief the CEO and, where appropriate, the Board on the findings
- implement any recommended corrective actions, which may include:
  - an apology or explanation to the complainant
  - correction of records or information
  - changes to ACOLA's policies, procedures or risk controls
  - staff or volunteer training
  - disciplinary action up to and including termination of employment or engagement
  - referral to relevant authorities, or
  - suspension or termination of a partnership or funding agreement,
- notify the complainant of the outcome within twenty business days of receipt of the complaint, where the complainant has identified themselves. Where a complaint is complex and cannot be resolved within twenty business days, the Complaints Officer will notify the complainant of the delay and provide a revised timeframe, and
- advise the complainant of any further avenues available to them if they are not satisfied with the outcome, including the option to raise a concern with the ACNC at [www.acnc.gov.au/raise-concern](http://www.acnc.gov.au/raise-concern).

### **Step 7: Record keeping**

The Complaints Officer will maintain a confidential Complaints Register recording:

- the date and nature of each complaint received
- the stream assigned at triage
- the outcome of the initial assessment
- any mandatory or external reports made
- the outcome of any investigation
- any corrective actions taken, and
- the date and nature of any communication with the complainant.

Access to the Complaints Register will be limited to the Complaints Officer, CEO and Board Chair, except where disclosure is required by law.

ACOLA will retain all records relating to a complaint, including the Complaints Register entry, correspondence, supporting documents and details of any investigation or resolution, for a minimum of seven years from the date the complaint is closed. Records may be retained for a longer period where required by law, a regulator, funding agreement, insurance requirement, litigation hold, redress process, police or regulatory investigation or other legitimate organisational purpose.

Complaints records may contain personal information. In accordance with the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) and the Australian Privacy Principles, ACOLA will store these records securely, restrict access to authorised personnel and securely destroy or de-identify them once the applicable retention period has lapsed and they are no longer required.

## Interaction With Other Policies

- External complaint about ACOLA's conduct, governance, or services:  
→ this Policy
- Safeguarding concern (adult):  
→ Safeguarding Policy → this Policy for procedure
- Child safety concern:  
→ Child Safety Policy → this Policy for procedure
- Internal workplace grievance between ACOLA personnel:  
→ Grievance Resolution Policy and Procedure
- Protected disclosure / whistleblower concern  
→ Whistleblower Policy (may also engage this Policy)
- Concern about a Board member or Responsible Person  
→ this Policy → escalated to CEO or Board Chair

Where a concern could fall under more than one policy, the Complaints Officer will determine the primary pathway and ensure the person is informed of any concurrent processes that may apply.

## Confidentiality and Privacy

All complaints will be handled with strict confidentiality. Information will only be disclosed to those who need it to manage the complaint or comply with legal obligations. The handling of personal information is governed by ACOLA's Privacy Policy and the *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth).

ACOLA will establish clear guidelines about how sensitive information is managed in relation to complaints, consistent with the ACNC Safeguarding Tool (2025) and Australian Privacy Principles.

Where appropriate, ACOLA will de-identify complaint information for the purposes of Board reporting and policy review.

## Support for Complainants and Affected Persons

ACOLA will ensure that complainants and any person affected by a complaint have access to appropriate support, including information about internal and external support services and referral to professional counselling or support agencies where appropriate.

ACOLA will protect any person who makes a complaint in good faith from retaliation, consistent with ACOLA's Whistleblower Policy and Part 9.4AAA of the *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth).

## Board Oversight and Reporting

The Complaints Officer will provide the Board with regular, de-identified reports on complaint volumes, types, trends, systemic issues and corrective actions taken.

This reporting supports Responsible Persons in discharging their duties under ACNC Governance Standard 5 and demonstrates ACOLA's commitment to continuous improvement.

## Breaches of this Policy

Failure to comply with this Policy, including failure to report a complaint, breach of confidentiality, or retaliation against a complainant, will be taken seriously and may result in disciplinary action, up to and including termination of employment or engagement.

## Legislative and Regulatory Framework

This Policy is informed by:

- *Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission Act 2012* (Cth)
- ACNC Governance Standards (in particular Governance Standards 1, 2, and 5)
- *Privacy Act 1988* (Cth) and the Australian Privacy Principles
- *Corporations Act 2001* (Cth), including whistleblower protections under Part 9.4AAA
- ACNC Safeguarding Tool (2025)
- Commonwealth Ombudsman's Better Practice Complaint Handling Guide
- Applicable state and territory mandatory reporting legislation
- *Working with Vulnerable People (Background Checking) Act 2011* (ACT) and equivalent schemes in other jurisdictions where ACOLA operates.

ACOLA will monitor changes to this framework and update this policy accordingly.

## Review

This Policy will be reviewed every two years, or sooner following a serious complaint, a significant change in applicable law or regulatory guidance, or a material change to ACOLA's activities.

The Board is responsible for approving amendments to this Policy.

## Availability

The current version of this Policy is:

- published on ACOLA's website at [Policies | ACOLA](#)
- provided to new Board members, employees and key volunteers at induction
- available internally via relevant ACOLA SharePoint sites, and
- can be provided in hard copy on request from the Complaints Officer at [confidential@acola.org.au](mailto:confidential@acola.org.au) or Company Secretary at [company.secretary@acola.org.au](mailto:company.secretary@acola.org.au).

## Version Control

| ACOLA Governance Policy |               |          |             |          |             |
|-------------------------|---------------|----------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| Version                 | Reviewed by   | Date     | Approved by | Date     | Next Review |
| V1.2026                 | ARF Committee | 15.06.26 | ACOLA Board | 01.07.26 | 01.07.28    |