

Women's Aid Membership Complaints Policy and Procedure

Women's Aid is a federation of specialist domestic abuse services from across England. Each member organisation within the federation exists as an independent charity with their own governing board and their own complaints procedure and process. This policy and procedure sets out how complaints relating to member organisations within the federation will be managed.

1. Statement of Intent

- 1.1. The objective of this policy is to respond to any dissatisfaction with Women's Aid member services fairly and promptly. At all stages of the process Women's Aid seeks to work with a trauma-informed, intersectional and anti-oppressive lens.
- 1.2. This policy seeks to ensure that any individual can have the opportunity to raise complaints regarding Women's Aid member organisations. Individuals who may wish to raise complaints may include survivors, professionals or other stakeholders. Complaints shall be dealt with quickly in a solution-focused way within the bounds of what is reasonable and feasible for Women's Aid to provide.
- 1.3. Women's Aid seeks to learn, support and encourage its members to learn from complaints shared to further improve the work of Women's Aid and its member organisations. Feedback from stakeholders such as survivors, members and other complainants is valued and is an essential part of our quality improvement planning. Where areas of wider sector learning are identified Women's Aid will agree with the member service parameters for sharing anonymised points of learning. This could include sharing within the federation or wider sector learning.
- 1.4. Following the conclusion of the complaints process both complainant and member service will have an opportunity to share any areas of learning for Women's Aid.

2. Definitions

2.1. The following terms, used in this policy, are defined as below:

- **stakeholders** – any individual or organisation who is potentially impacted by a complaint or cause for concern or who has an interest in the outcome of the complaint (for example, commissioners or funders).
- **survivor** – an individual who has experienced domestic abuse and, in the context of this policy, has accessed support from a Women's Aid member service.
- **member** – an organisation which is a member of Women's Aid Federation of England. This includes full members who hold National Quality Standard accreditation, full members who are not currently accredited and associate members.
- **complainant** – person raising a complaint or cause for concern.
- **conflict of interest** – a situation where an individual or organisation's ability to be impartial may potentially be impacted.

3. Scope of Policy

3.1. This policy applies to all stakeholders in Women's Aid member services. For Women's Aid to investigate a complaint, it will need to confirm that:

- the service in question is a member of Women's Aid.
- there has been a potential breach of Women's Aid Membership Terms of Reference and/or National Quality Standards (where applicable).
- the complainant has followed the Women's Aid member organisations internal complaints process and is not satisfied with the outcome.

3.2. In exceptional circumstances a complaint can be made directly to Women's Aid without following the Women's Aid member organisations internal complaints process. These include:

- Complainant is a survivor currently accessing support from the Women's Aid member service and is concerned there may be repercussions as a result of raising a complaint.
- Concerns of systemic discrimination (the perpetuation of discrimination as a result of policies, procedures or practice).

3.3. The policy covers complaints relating to the following areas:

- The delivery of a programme or service by a Women's Aid member service

- misleading or incorrect information presented in writing by a Women's Aid member service to a survivor or professional partner.
- Unsafe facilities, such as accommodation or resources, provided by a Women's Aid member service.
- Inefficiencies in administration resulting in breaches of National Quality Standards or Women's Aid membership terms of reference by a Women's Aid member service.
- An action or inaction on the part of a Women's Aid member service resulting in breaches of national quality standards or Women's Aid membership terms of reference.

3.4. The policy does not cover the following areas:

- Matters where litigation is in process.
- The delivery of a programme or service by an organisation who is not a member of Women's Aid.
- Anonymous or third-party complaints - these will be recorded as a cause for concern in line with 3.6 but will not be investigated under the complaints procedure.
- Complaints about decisions made during staff disciplinary proceedings.
- Complaints regarding actions taken by a service user unless the complaint relates to a Women's Aid member organisation management of the complaint.
- Complaints relating to the behaviour of Women's Aid member organisation staff external to their work unless there is a direct impact on the safety or wellbeing of survivors within the Women's Aid member service.
- Complaints relating to Find a Feminist Freelancer listed consultants. If you have a complaint in this area, please refer to the Find a Feminist Freelancer Complaints Policy and Procedure.

3.5. In the event of a complaint regarding a historical concern this policy will apply. However, it is noted that if a concern is historical or a service is no longer in operation there may be limitations to potential outcomes. For the purposes of this policy and procedure 'historical' is defined as over 12 months.

3.6. Where a complaint regarding a Women's Aid member service is received but does not meet the scope of this policy (as outlined in 3.1-3.4) it will be deemed a cause for concern and recorded as such. Where a member organisation receives more than three causes for concern within a rolling 12 month period, Women's Aid reserves the right to follow the complaints procedure and conduct an investigation.

3.7. In the event of a critical incident or near miss involving a Women's Aid member, Women's Aid reserves the right to complete a learning review to identify key factors and any learning for the member, Women's Aid or the VAWG sector as a result. For the purposes of this policy and procedure, critical incidents are defined as events resulting in harm and near misses are defined as events which have the potential to cause harm.

4. Monitoring and Data

4.1. Data gathered during the complaints process will be processed and stored in line with the Women's Aid Data Protection Policy.

4.2. Equality monitoring data captured during the complaints process will be anonymised and used by Women's Aid to inform their work with minoritised survivors and by and for services.

4.3. Where a Women's Aid NQS member has been involved in the complaints process, including participation in an improvement plan, and where it is within 6 months of applying for or renewing their National Quality Standards, the content of complaint-related improvement plans will be shared with their NQS assessor to support the accreditation process. Identifying information relating to the complainant will not be shared. The above also applies to 'causes for concern'. Women's Aid reserves the right to share this information with assessors employed by Women's Aid and consultant assessors contracted for individual assessments. Women's Aid will seek to inform the member of information sharing but reserves the right to share complaint information as described without explicit consent from the Women's Aid member.

4.4. Where a complaint is received regarding a Women's Aid National Quality Standards holder, a Women's Aid member currently undergoing assessment or a Women's Aid member undergoing renewal of the National Quality Standards, Women's Aid reserves the right to suspend assessment/accreditation/renewal pending an investigation outcome. The Initial suspension period will be for 3 months although this may be extended to allow further investigation. Where complaints are upheld suspension will remain in place until the completion of an agreed improvement plan.

- 4.5. Where a complaint is upheld relating to a Women's Aid member listed on Routes to Support, information regarding learning plans will be shared with the Routes to Support team within Women's Aid. Any identifying information relating to the complainant will not be shared. Please see Routes to Support guidance for further information on Routes to Support listing expectations.
- 4.6. Where causes for concerns are received for non-Women's Aid member organisation listed on Routes to Support this information will be shared with Routes to Support. Please see Routes to Support guidance for further information on Routes to Support listing expectations.
- 4.7. Following completion of the complaints process anonymised information will be used as part of Women's Aid Membership learning review to identify trends and patterns to support sector-wide learning. Use of information includes recording of root causes and key contributing factors for the purposes of informing policy and research work within Women's Aid and for wider sector learning. Information will not include aspects, identifying members services or complainants, and will be retained for the duration of any actions or learning identified.
- 4.8. Information relating to causes for concern, complaints and learning reviews will remain active for 6 months following closure of complaint/cause for concern or completion of improvement plan recommendations. This may be referred to if further complaints/causes for concern are raised or during a NQS assessment.

5. Procedure

- 5.1. Please see appendix 1 for the complaint procedure and appendix 2 for the cause of concern procedure. Further details on complaint and cause for concern processes are included within the Women's Aid Membership Complaints Standard Operating Procedures. Outcomes from complaint investigations can be as follows:
- **Upheld** – complaint investigation has identified evidence that this area of the complaint is founded.
 - **Partially Upheld** – complaint investigation has identified evidence that some aspects of this area of the complaint are founded.
 - **Not Upheld** – complaint investigation has identified evidence that this area of the complaint is not founded.
 - **Unsubstantiated** – complaint investigation failed to identify evidence to support an upheld, partially upheld or not upheld outcome.

5.2. If a safeguarding concern is identified during the complaints process, the Women's Aid Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults Policy and Procedure will be followed. Safeguarding concerns may include, but are not limited to:

- Involvement of a child or young person
- Death of a service user while accessing the service
- Concerns relating to refuge security
- Complaints concerning a board member

5.3. Where a conflict of interest is identified the following will apply:

- If the conflict of interest relates to the complaint investigator, an alternative investigator within Women's Aid will be appointed to conduct the investigation.
- If the conflict of interest relates to Women's Aid as an organisation, an external independent investigator will be appointed to conduct the investigation.
- If the conflict of interest relates to a Trustee of the Women's Aid Board, the Trustee will step-down from the Board for the duration of the investigation. Where a complaint relating to a Trustee of Women's Aid, is upheld or partially upheld the Chair of Trustees will appoint representatives to review the upheld aspects of the complaint alongside the Women's Aid Governance Framework to identify potential breaches. Reinstatement to the Board will include consideration of review outcomes. It is noted that in line with Trustee roles and responsibilities, representatives of the Board of Trustees are not required to agree to the findings of a complaint investigation.

Conflicts of interest include, but are not limited to, professional or personal relationships to the Women's Aid member or complainant involved such as links to the Women's Aid member or being involved in previous complaint investigations with the Women's Aid member or complainant.

5.4. Where an agreement regarding outcomes cannot be reached final decisions will be made by the CEO (complaint investigation outcomes) or Chair of Trustees (Governance Framework review).

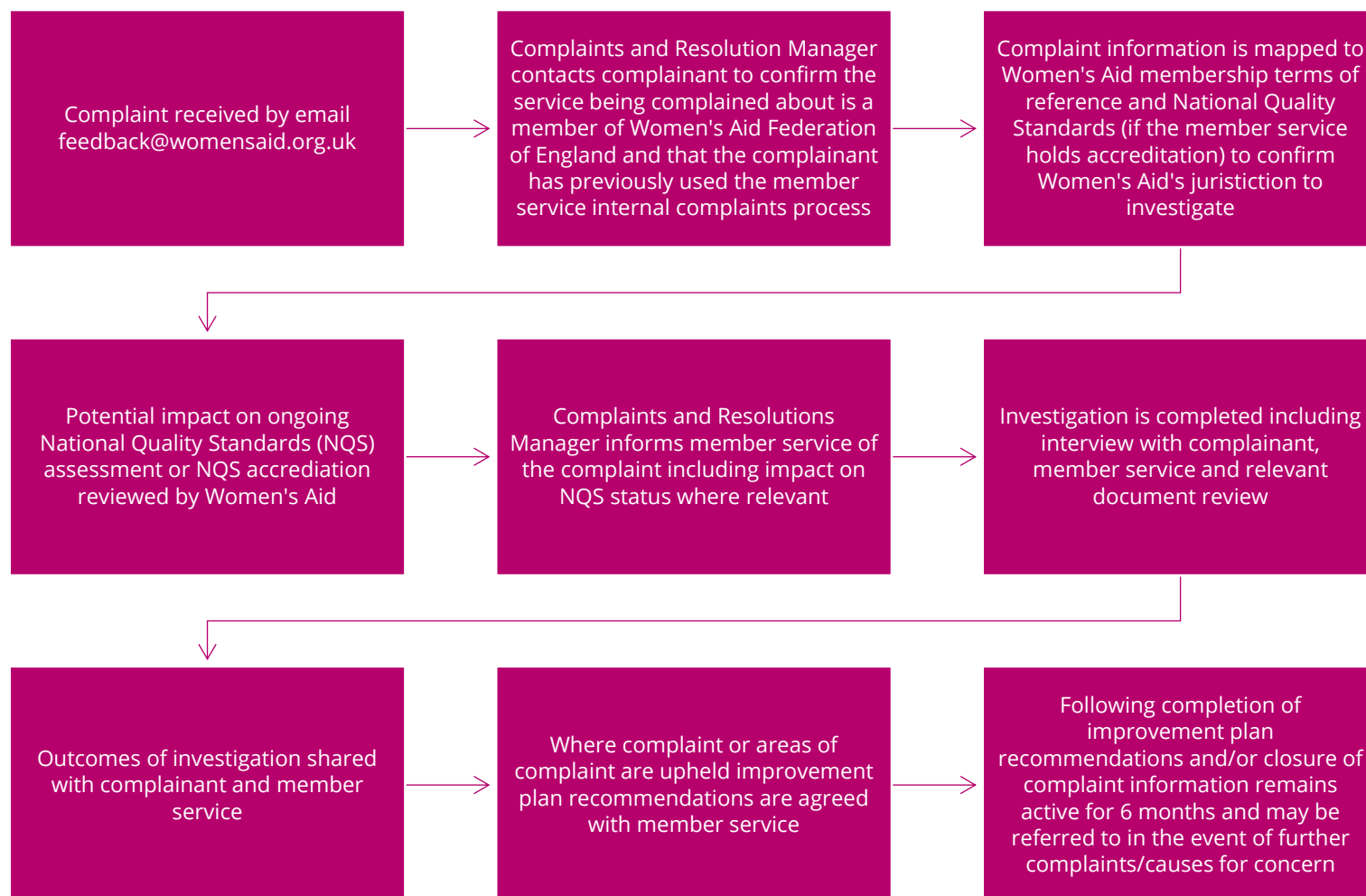
6. Associated Policies

6.1. The following Women's Aid policies should be read alongside the Women's Aid Membership Complaints Policy

- Customer Care Policy and Procedure
- Data Protection Policy
- Safeguarding Children and Vulnerable Adults Policy

- Whistle-blowing Policy.

Appendix 1 – Complaints Procedure Flowchart



Appendix 2 – Cause for Concern Procedure Flowchart

