

# ACC Complaints Management Process

## Summary Guide

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### Introduction

The Association of Christians in Counselling and Linked Professions (ACC) holds an Accredited Register of counsellors and psychotherapists, overseen by the [Professional Standards Authority](#) (PSA). ACC's role is to protect the public and uphold professional standards.

Counsellors who are members of ACC are on an accredited register, and this means that they have the appropriate training to work as a counsellor and are following professional guidelines and ethics. To search ACC's accredited register, please visit our website [here](#).

As with other professions, an important way of upholding standards in counselling and psychotherapy is to have a way of investigating complaints and concerns in fair and transparent ways. Complaints give rise to learning and improvements in service. They are also a means of preventing anyone unsafe or incapable of practising safely from membership of ACC and other professional bodies.

### Who can make a complaint?

Anyone can make a complaint. This includes clients, former clients, family members, employers, or members of the public. We hope that anyone complaining about a member has first tried to raise the issue directly with them. We recognise that it may not always be possible or appropriate to do so.

### What can ACC consider?

ACC can consider anything that breaches [ACC's Ethics and Practice Standards](#) and/or [ACC's Terms and Conditions of Membership](#) for counselling and psychotherapy.

For example,

- a counsellor's inappropriate behaviour with a client or colleague, or their conduct in a public space (that is, whether they are doing things that are unethical and/or unsafe).
- concerns about the counsellor's skill, capability and/or aptitude to deliver therapy (or other related) service.
- concerns about a counsellor's engagement in activities which could lead to loss of confidence in the counselling profession or in ACC as a membership body, for example content of posts on social media platforms.

ACC can help and advise anyone who wants to discuss their concerns prior to submitting a complaint. Please note, a complaint can only be made about someone who is on our register of counsellors, which can be searched [here](#).

### **What happens when a complaint is made?**

Not all complaints can or should be investigated, so stage 1 below will determine whether a complaint investigation can proceed. Similarly, complaints vary in severity and potential risk impact, so an initial assessment at stage 2 will determine which of 3 possible paths the complaint process will take

#### **Stage one: threshold test**

ACC will confirm whether the complaint is one that can be investigated by us. For example, the person being complained about must be a current member of ACC.

#### **Stage two: severity and risk assessment**

ACC assesses how serious the concern is if it were found to be true, and the potential risk of harm is assessed as low, medium, or high. This helps us to work out what the most appropriate process is to follow.

### Stage three: select the appropriate process

ACC chooses the right process to deal with the complaint.

- **Low risk** – Feedback and Right to Reply process.  
Sometimes all that is needed is for the counsellor to receive feedback on their service, and an opportunity, if they choose to do so, to respond to the complainant. The communication between the complainant and counsellor is facilitated by ACC.
- **Medium risk** – Practice Review process (a professional development-focused panel). This is appropriate for the less serious concerns where the focus is on whether the counsellor could improve their practice. The counsellor and complainant are invited to submit information about the complaint to a panel of experienced counsellors and a lay person<sup>1</sup>. The panel meets to review the information provided and to discuss the counsellor's practice with them to explore whether there are lessons to learn and/or improvements to make.
- **High risk** – Investigation and Fitness to Practise hearing (public safety-focused panel). This is appropriate for more serious allegations of misconduct or fitness to practice. Complaints are formally investigated by someone independent of ACC, and the outcome is determined by an independent panel of counsellors and lay people.

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<sup>1</sup> A lay person is someone who is not involved in the counselling and psychotherapy profession. It could be someone who has received counselling.

The risk and severity level of a complaint can be reassessed at any time if new evidence comes to light.

### **Possible outcomes from the various complaint processes**

Complaint processes are aimed at ensuring that counsellors practice well and safely. They are not intended to punish members. Possible outcomes for the counsellor include:

- Learning from feedback and reflection.
- Required improvements to practice.
- Restrictions, suspension, or removal from ACC membership (where fitness to practise is impaired or unsafe).

### **Fairness and support**

ACC tries to ensure that:

- We communicate clearly with everyone concerned.
- Complaints are handled impartially and confidentially.
- Both complainants and counsellors are treated with respect.
- Reasonable adjustments can be made for accessibility or vulnerability.

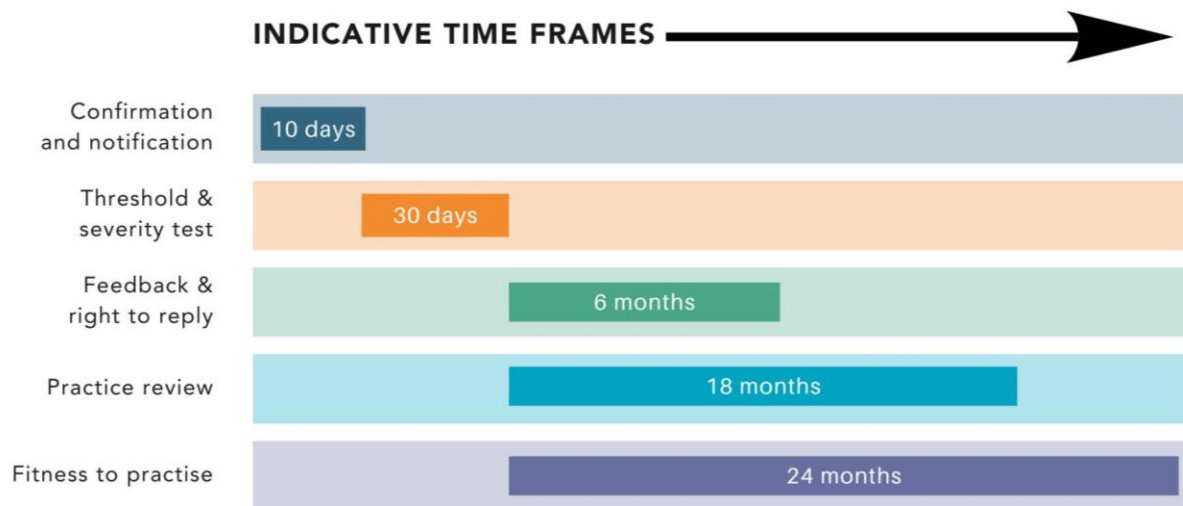
As the membership body responsible for upholding standards and investigating and progressing complaints, ACC is limited in the support that can be given to those involved in complaints. We therefore encourage all parties to seek appropriate help and support from others to help cope with the stress that normally accompanies complaint processes.

## Timescales

Complaints processes can take a long time to reach completion. This is because it takes time to gather evidence, arrange meetings, and the process is dependent on key people's availability.

Set out below are indicate timeframes:

- Acknowledgement, assessing risk and determining what process will be covered: up to 40 days from the receipt of a complaint.
- Feedback & Right to Reply: up to 6 months.
- Practice Review: up to 18 months.
- Fitness to Practise: up to 24 months.



*This guidance is a summary. Full details are set out in the ACC Complaints Management Policy [will be on website, included in the consultation papers]*

## For members

### What to expect if a complaint is made about you?

The complaint process document sets out in detail the timings of notifications and what will be expected of you in terms of responses etc. It is likely that being notified of a complaint will be a stressful experience, and it's important to seek the support of your supervisor or appropriate others.

Not all complaints involve misconduct. Many relate to misunderstandings, mistakes, or areas for reflection. It can be helpful to remember that as a professional complaint process need to:

- Protect clients and the public
- Uphold professional standards
- Enable learning and development where appropriate

Many counsellors will be subject to complaints in their career. Having a complaint may not necessarily be a reflection of whether a counsellor is good and effective. In the majority of complaints that do not involve behavioural misconduct, complaints indicate a perception or assessment from a client that the service fell below their expectation and a desire on the client's behalf that this can be prevented from happening in the future.

### Your responsibilities

As a condition of ACC membership, you must:

- Cooperate fully and honestly.
- Respond within required timescales.
- Attend meetings or hearings if required.
- Complete actions and sanctions that result from a complaint process.
- Notify ACC of complaints or investigations by other bodies.

## Support

As the body responsible for investigating and progressing complaints, ACC is limited in the support that can be given to members subject to complaints. We therefore encourage members to seek appropriate support from others to help cope with the stress that accompanies complaint processes.

Members are strongly encouraged to:

- Speak with your supervisor
- Seek professional or personal support
- Inform your insurance company
- Obtain legal advice if appropriate

## Overview of the complaints process

### Completed complaint form received by ACC

1. ACC checks that the person against whom the complaint has been made is a current ACC registered member
2. If YES, the complainant given an acknowledgement and counsellor is informed of the complaint and sent the complaint form
3. If NO, the complainant is informed that the complaint cannot be processed



### ACC Complaints Manager and Registrar

1. Conduct threshold test - PASS/REJECT
2. Assess severity of potential risk of harm - LOW/MEDIUM/HIGH
3. Decide if a Temporary Suspension Order is to be issued - YES/NO
4. The Chair of ACC notifies the parties of the relevant procedure to be followed



#### LOW RISK

##### Feedback and Right to Reply

Communication  
exchange between  
parties moderated  
via ACC

#### MEDIUM RISK

##### Practice Review

Panel and potential  
for actions to  
complete for the  
registrant

#### HIGH RISK

##### Complaints Investigation & Fitness to Practise

Panel and potential  
sanctions for the  
registrant

Details of each of the three procedures can be found in ACC's Complaint Management Policy.

### **Timescales**

- Acknowledgement and determining what process will be covered: up to 3 months.
- Feedback & Right to Reply: up to 6 months.
- Practice Review: up to 18 months.
- Fitness to Practice: up to 24 months.

*This guidance is a summary. Full details are set out in the ACC Complaints Management Policy {[LINK](#)}*