

Writing Response Letters to Complaints and Appeals

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This short note should be read in conjunction with the fact sheet that describes the complaints procedure for The Scout Association (FS140100). The fact sheet can be found on the Scout website at www.scouts.org.uk/managers by looking at the "complaints" section.

When writing the final complaint or appeal outcome response to the complainant, consider the following:

1. Do not send a letter by email as a word document attachment as this might easily be edited. My preference is to send a physical letter or, in some circumstances, to send a PDF document that is a scan of the physical letter once it has been signed.
2. Do not assume that anything you send to the complainant will remain confidential even if you mark it as such. Write it with the expectation that other people will see it.
3. Remember that when you write a letter (or an email for that matter) you write it with your particular view of the situation and you use certain intonation in your voice to stress words and therefore change the meaning. The reader has a different view of the situation and won't know the intonation that you intended. You therefore need to spend more time writing carefully to make the meaning absolutely clear. You might also consider getting someone else to read it (in confidence) to check for clarity, how it reads and of course spelling and grammar!
4. If writing letters isn't your thing, ask for help. See if other local managers have examples of letters (with any confidential information removed) that they have sent that you can use as templates.
5. Particularly with a sensitive letter, write it and then put it to one side. Come back to it the next day and read it again and put yourself in the position of the person receiving the letter. You will probably make some changes!
6. Ensure that you answer the key points of the complaint or appeal. It is a delicate line to tread, but do not write a huge, lengthy reply as this tends to introduce inaccuracies. Stick to the key issues and answer them clearly and succinctly. It is a good idea to ask the complainant early on in the process exactly what the key issues are and what outcome the complainant would ideally expect. These can then be addressed in the enquiry and the response.
7. The style of the letter should be your own – not overly formal. But remember to be polite and firm so that there is no possible confusion about the outcome of the letter.
8. Ensure that in the letter you take responsibility for the decision that you have made (e.g. "I have considered the matter carefully and my decision is that your complaint is upheld"). It is important to retain the responsibility for the decision even if someone else has carried out the investigation on your behalf.
9. I suggest a structure of the letter along these lines:
 - a. Start with being clear on the issue you are addressing and the timeline.
 - b. Then say if you uphold the complaint/appeal or not. It is best to get this stated early in the letter so that the reader knows the outcome quickly rather than having to read the whole letter before finding out.

- c. Next cover the reasons for your decision and cover each of the key points in the complaint or the appeal.
 - d. Finally clearly state the next steps available to the complainant including who the next point of contact is if appropriate. The two options (outcome of complaint and outcome of appeal) are given below.
10. Keep the letter polite even if the complainant has not been polite to you.

Examples

The examples below are just that – examples – not the only way of writing these types of letters. They are provided to show an example of the structure and the type of things that should be covered in the letters. It is important to write your letters in your style so that they are genuine.

Please note that the subject of the complaint is entirely fictitious and the exact content of the response will, of course, rely entirely on the specific complaint and the people involved. So please do not spend a lot of time analysing the reasons and so on, but look at the overall structure of the letters.

I usually type the letter but write the salutation and sign by hand to ensure that the recipient sees that I have taken some time and care with the letter.

Example 1a: Response to a complaint, written by a Group Scout Leader following a complaint from a parent about the way in which her son was treated at a Scout camp.

George Jackson
Group Scout Leader
[address]
[date]

Mrs Jordan
[address]

Dear Mrs Jordan,

Re: Complaint regarding the treatment of your son at camp on 1 September.

Following our conversation on 5 September, your formal letter of complaint on 8 September and our subsequent discussion on 15 September I write to let you know my decision. Having considered the details of the case, I do not agree with this complaint.

I have spoken to the Leaders at the camp and considered the programme. You were unhappy that your son (along with half of the Troop) was unable to undertake the rock climbing on the last day of the camp and feel that this is unfair. I am content that the weather conditions had deteriorated considerably at that time and that it would have been unsafe to have continued with the activity which unfortunately meant that half the Troop did not get a chance to climb. Whilst the Scouts were disappointed, they will get chances in the future to climb.

I understand that you may be unhappy about my decision. Under the Scout Association's complaint procedure you may appeal this decision within 3 months of the date of this letter. If you do wish to appeal, please contact the District Commissioner in writing (Jane Smith, 35 Grove Gardens) and provide the reason for your appeal.

I do hope that we can find a way for your son to continue to enjoy his Scouting which he has been doing for the past two years.

Yours faithfully,

George Jackson

George Jackson
Group Scout Leader

CC: Jane Smith, District Commissioner.

Example 1b: Response to an appeal, written by a District Commissioner following a complaint from a parent about the way in which her son was treated at a Scout camp.

Jane Smith
District Commissioner
[address]
[date]

Mrs Jordan
[address]

Dear Mrs Jordan,

Further to our discussion on 6 November regarding your appeal against the outcome of your complaint regarding the way in which your son was treated at the camp on 1 September, I write to let you know my decision.

I take this matter very seriously and I have spoken with the leaders involved, the Group Scout Leader and a number of other people to gather more information and I have also read the documentation relating to the issue. My decision is that I agree with the Group Scout Leader's decision and your appeal is not upheld.

I consider that the decision of the Scout Leader to change the programme was clearly required as a matter of safety given the weather conditions. Whilst your son was clearly unhappy that he was unable to try the rock climbing, it was unavoidable and there will be other opportunities in the future.

I understand that you may be disappointed at this outcome but it is my considered opinion which, under the Scout Association's complaint procedure, is final and no further correspondence on this issue will be entered into.

I have asked the Group Scout Leader to talk to you about ensuring that your son continues to enjoy his Scouting.

Yours faithfully,

Jane Smith

Jane Smith
District Commissioner

Example 2: Response to a complaint, written by a Group Scout Leader following a complaint from a parent about the way in which her son was treated at a Scout camp.

George Jackson
Group Scout Leader
[address]

[date]

Mrs Jessett
[address]

Dear Mrs Jessett,

Re: Complaint regarding the treatment of your son at camp on 12 August.

Following our conversation on 18 August, your formal letter of complaint dated 20 August and our subsequent discussion on 21 August I write to let you know my decision. Having considered the details of the case, I agree with your complaint and I write to let you know what action I will take.

I have spoken to the Leaders at the camp and considered what happened. You were unhappy that your son was punished for his behaviour when it was not clear what was expected by the leaders and that he was the only Scout not allowed to undertake activities one day during the camp and was subsequently left on his own on the campsite. The circumstances were such that I believe the punishment was unfair and that in any case he should not have been left alone on the site.

I have discussed this with the leaders and they agree that, in retrospect, the situation should have been handled better.

You told me that your prime concern was to ensure that this did not happen in the future. I have agreed with the leaders that they will create a code of conduct with the Scouts (and share it with the parents) so that everyone is clear about acceptable behaviour in the future and to ensure that no confusion might arise. We have also agreed that in future no Scout will be left alone on a campsite (or similar situation).

Both I and the leaders are very sorry that your son had this unfortunate incident upset his enjoyment of the camp and apologise to you and your son.

I do hope that your son will continue to enjoy his Scouting which he has been doing for the past two years.

Yours faithfully,

George Jackson

George Jackson
Group Scout Leader

CC: Jane Smith, District Commissioner.