

## VOCAL Counselling Service – Service Standards & Complaints

(Dec 2023)

*“By listening and understanding we can work in partnership with carers to empower and support them in their endeavours to find the best possible outcome to their situation”*

The Carers Counselling Service endeavors to offer a high quality service that most appropriately meets carers’ needs. We welcome comments and feedback. We want to ensure that the services we offer best meet the needs of those who use the service. Your comments about what has been helpful or not so helpful will help us to assess and evaluate what we do and make changes if necessary.

If you have any comments about the service or any ideas about how the service can be improved, please email the Counselling Service Manager at [agenetti@vocal.org.uk](mailto:agenetti@vocal.org.uk), or write to

VOCAL Edinburgh Carers’ Hub  
60 Leith Walk, Edinburgh EH6 5HB  
Telephone: 0131 466 8082

or VOCAL Midlothian Carers Centre  
30/1 Hardengreen Estate, Eskbank EH22 3NX  
Telephone 0795 842 2761

### Standards of Service

This document sets out the standards of service that carers and those working with carers can expect of VOCAL. If you would like to make a complaint or suggestion about how we might improve our service, this document also explains the Complaints Procedure.

All enquiries to the organisation will be treated in strictest confidence.

Our Counselling Service aims to be accessible to all sections of society. We seek to ensure that carers who receive our service are treated fairly and with respect, and are provided with the support they require based on need and without reference to gender, marital status, race, ethnic origin, colour, nationality, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, religion or age.

VOCAL staff and volunteers will be polite and helpful at all times. When you write to us, telephone or visit the Centre, the person you are in contact with will tell you their name.

Services provided by VOCAL are free of charge to carers in Edinburgh and Midlothian.

If your enquiry is outside the remit and scope of VOCAL’s Counselling Service, staff will, with your agreement, refer your enquiry to an appropriate agency. If you need advice or assistance in contacting the agency we will be pleased to assist you.

Where your enquiry falls within the Counselling Service’ remit, details of your enquiry will be recorded by the appropriate member of staff or a counsellor. An assessment of the type of support required will be made and appropriate help will be offered. Any action taken will be with your full knowledge and consent.

### **When you contact VOCAL**

When you write to VOCAL's Counselling Service we will seek to reply or acknowledge your letter within five working days.\*

When you telephone VOCAL your questions will be answered as fully and as helpfully as possible. If your enquiry is of a specialist or more complex nature, we will endeavour to respond with the appropriate information within five working days\*. If this is not possible we will contact you to let you know of any delays and when we expect to have an answer.

When you visit VOCAL without appointment you will be made to feel welcome and given the opportunity to discuss your enquiry with the appropriate member of staff. If a member of staff is not available, an appointment will be made for you to visit the Centre when an appropriate worker will be present.

When you visit the Carers Centre by appointment an appropriate worker will be there to meet you and respond to your enquiry. You are free to bring a friend or relative along with you.

### **Code of Practice**

All the counsellors who practice with the project adhere to the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Ethical Framework and Statement of Ethics and also the Code of Practice of Scotland's Professional Body for Counselling and Psychotherapy (COSCA). If you would like to see the codes, please ask the Service Manager.

### **Complaints Procedure**

If you are unhappy with any aspect of the service provided by the Counselling Service and would like to make a complaint, please follow the procedure outlined in this document.

As a first step, your complaint should be submitted in person, in writing, by telephone, on tape or through a friend or representative to the Service Manager of VOCAL's Counselling Service. If your complaint involves the Service Manager, please direct it to VOCAL's Chief Executive.

Your complaint will be acknowledged within five working days of being received.\* Your complaint will be recorded and investigated at the earliest opportunity and the person complained against will be informed. All complaints will be treated in strictest confidence. VOCAL will communicate with the complainant and complained against about the progress of the investigation.

We will contact you if further information is required. You will be contacted in writing within fifteen working days from the date of the letter of acknowledgement informing you of the outcome of the investigation.\*

If you are not satisfied with the response you have received, you can appeal in writing to the Chief Executive or the Chairperson of VOCAL's Board of Directors, marking the envelope 'private and confidential' and sending it to VOCAL Edinburgh Carers' Hub, 60 Leith Walk, Edinburgh EH6 5HB. The Chief Executive or the Chairperson may decide to refer your appeal to an independent appeals panel.

Your letter will be acknowledged within five working days.\* The Chairperson will investigate your complaint and may contact you for further information. Both parties will be informed of the outcome of this investigation and any action to be taken in writing fifteen working days from the date of the letter of acknowledgement and it will include the reasons for the decision.\* Third parties, representatives and anonymous complainants will not be notified directly.

If you are still not satisfied, you can raise your complaint with COSCA under its complaints procedure - <https://cosca.org.uk/guidance-policies/complaints> - within one month of exhausting VOCAL's appeals procedure. On receipt of the complaint, COSCA will verify that the VOCAL's complaints procedure has been followed and the outcome was lawful, reasonable and properly explained. COSCA will publish upheld complaints and their sanctions.

Or you can raise your complaint with the Client Services and Complaints Office of Edinburgh's Health and Social Care Department. If this fails to satisfy, your complaint can be taken to the Chief Executive of the City of Edinburgh Council. If you are still not satisfied, you can contact the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman.

Once a complaint is received, VOCAL will seek to ensure that the process of investigation of a complaint or appeal will not exceed 4 weeks.\*

VOCAL will use a clear test to decide if there is a case to answer, e.g. ensure that there is sufficient corroborating evidence to support the complaint for it to be processed for investigation.

Vexatious or malicious use of the complaints procedure will not be tolerated. Following investigation, and before reaching a decision that a complaint is vexatious or malicious, we might seek advice from legal or other specialists.

### **Who can complain?**

- Anyone who uses the counselling service.
- Anyone who has accessed the counselling service in the past year.
- Anyone who has made enquiries about the service.
- Anyone who is on the waiting list.
- Anyone representing someone who meets the above criteria.
- We will not accept complaints from third parties.

Our complaints procedure covers complaints against members of staff or volunteers and groups carrying out work related to counselling and psychotherapy on behalf of VOCAL. Anonymous complaints will be investigated by the Chief Executive or the Chairperson of the Board and possible limitations will be addressed on a case by case basis.

### **What if the person complained against has left?**

If the complaint is against a former worker of a COSCA Member Organisation:

- Any investigation is conducted for the learning of the organisation e.g. to identify any systematic failures.

- Wherever possible the complained against is offered the opportunity to represent their own interest.
- The outcome report to COSCA will be sent, but the normal sanction report will not be published.
- If the former worker is still a member of COSCA, COSCA may investigate under the system for dealing with information about members.

### **How long do I have to make a complaint or appeal against the outcome of a complaint?**

Normally, you must make your complaint within six months of:

- the incident you want to complain about, or
- finding out that you have a reason to complain, but no later than 12 months after the incident

In exceptional circumstances, we may be able to accept a complaint after the time limit. If you feel that the time limit should not apply to your complaint, please tell us why.

Any appeal must reach us within three months of the letter of acknowledgement informing you of the outcome of the investigation. The complainant will be informed in writing within twenty-one days whether or not the appeal is accepted.\*

### **Accessing the complaints procedure**

This complaints procedure is available on request by contacting VOCAL or from the notice board within the counselling service waiting area. It is also downloadable in PDF format from our website. The complaints procedure can be translated or viewed in larger text.

In addition, information on COSCA's complaints procedure and their contact details are passed on to clients once they have started seeing a counsellor.

### **What if I need help to complain about VOCAL Counselling Service?**

If you need help to complain about the counselling service, you can choose someone to represent you.

We will offer any assistance you may need to understand our complaints procedure. Help is also available from Citizens' Advice Bureau, COSCA or local advocacy services and we can direct you to these services in our local area if you so wish.

### **Who will investigate my complaint?**

Investigators or members of a complaints panel will be impartial and independent of the complainant and person/counselling service location complained against and will act confidentially in their handling of the complaint.

We will attempt to communicate clearly and directly with all complainants or their representatives in a timely manner, as described below.

The complainant is required to give permission for confidential information pertinent to the complaint to be disclosed to all parties cited in the complaint by those involved in handling the complaint, including VOCAL's legal or other specialist advisors.

In the first instance, the Service Manager will act as complaint manager and appoint a second person to confer with. If the Service Manager is involved in the complaint, the Chief Executive will deal with the complaint. If necessary, an external panel will be appointed to ensure impartiality.

All parties involved in the complaint can, where relevant, declare a conflict of interest to the complaint manager. Evidence from either party will be heard separately and not together by the investigator and/or complaints panel.

The complainant and the party or parties complained against and/or their representative will not attend any complaints panel meeting at the same time. The complainant has the right to attend the complaints panel meeting and be accompanied and/or represented by a supportive person of their choice.

The complaint manager can halt the complaint at any stage should it emerge that legal action is under way, pending or intended and that the above person can halt the procedure until any legal process is complete. They may also adjourn the procedure or put the process in recess, ensuring that it will be re-started at the point at which it was stopped, within a reasonable time.

A complaint can be discontinued if the complainant fails or refuses to participate at any stage of the complaint procedure without good reason or the complainant formally withdraws the complaint. In these circumstances, both parties will be informed.

Following investigation there are a number of possible sanctions such as making additional supervision available to a counsellor, identifying additional training, implementing VOCAL's disciplinary procedure, or suspension from the counselling service. Fulfilment of sanctions imposed will be monitored by the complaint manager and communicated to the complainant in writing.

Once the investigation has been concluded, VOCAL will submit the report to COSCA at conclusion of Complaint proceedings.

## Where to send your comments and complaints

The Service Manager or the Chief Executive of VOCAL can be contacted at:

VOCAL Edinburgh Carers' Hub  
60 Leith Walk, Edinburgh EH6 5HB  
Telephone: 0131 622 6666  
E-mail: [chiefexecutive@vocal.org.uk](mailto:chiefexecutive@vocal.org.uk)

## Contact Addresses

COSCA  
16 Melville Terrace  
Stirling FK8 2NE

Tel: 01786 475 140  
Email: [info@cosca.org.uk](mailto:info@cosca.org.uk)  
Web: [www.cosca.org.uk](http://www.cosca.org.uk)

Client Services and Complaints Office  
Health & Social Care Department  
City of Edinburgh Council  
Waverley Court, 4 East Market Street  
Edinburgh EH8 8BG

Tel: 0131 553 8395

The Chief Executive  
City of Edinburgh Council  
City Chambers, High Street  
Edinburgh EH1 1YJ

Tel: 0131 200 2000

Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO)  
4 Melville Street  
Edinburgh EH3 7NS

Tel: 0800 377 7330  
Text: 0790 049 4372  
Fax: 0800 377 7331  
Email: [ask@spsa.org.uk](mailto:ask@spsa.org.uk)

Charity number: SCO 20755

\*Please note that there may be the rare exceptions of holidays, annual leave or unexpected emergency leave that could prolong the response beyond what has been stated in this document.

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