

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Complaints Handling Procedure (the “**Procedure**”) is established by the Institute of Registered Veterinary and Animal Physiotherapists (“**IRVAP**” or the “**Association**”) in accordance with the laws of England and Wales and principles of natural justice. It sets out how IRVAP will receive, assess, investigate and seek to resolve complaints made by members of the public, professional colleagues and IRVAP Members about the conduct, service or practice of IRVAP Members or about the services provided by or on behalf of IRVAP. The Procedure is intended to ensure complaints are handled promptly, fairly, transparently and confidentially; to reflect IRVAP’s Policies, Codes of Conduct and professional standards; and to balance the need for reasonable and proportionate, timely outcomes with the practical constraints of a primarily volunteer-run organisation.
- 1.2 This Procedure applies to: (a) complaints about the professional conduct, standards of practice or service provided by IRVAP Members; and (b) complaints about aspects of services delivered in the name of IRVAP. It covers complaints from members of the public, other professionals and IRVAP Members. Where appropriate, outcomes of this procedure may be handled under the Disciplinary Procedure.
- 1.3 Complaints should be made in writing (including by email) to the IRVAP Chair at irvapchair@irvap.org.uk, or in exceptional circumstances where there is a conflict of interest involving the Chair, to the IRVAP Secretary at admin@irvap.org.uk. The Council (through the Chair or an appointed Investigating Officer) is responsible for ensuring complaints are dealt with impartially and in accordance with this Procedure. Where necessary an independent investigator or panel may be appointed to preserve impartiality.
- 1.4 The IRVAP Chair may nominate and delegate any of their responsibilities under this Procedure to a suitably qualified individual or member of IRVAP, provided that (i) such delegation is made in writing, (ii) the delegate has the necessary expertise and independence to perform the delegated functions, and (iii) the IRVAP Chair remains ultimately accountable for the proper performance of all delegated responsibilities.

2. Scope of the Complaints Procedure

- 2.1 This Procedure provides a clear, accessible route for raising concerns and obtaining redress where IRVAP Members or IRVAP services are alleged to have fallen below the standards set out in IRVAP’s Policies, Codes of Conduct, or where other significant concerns arise (for example about safety, professionalism, discrimination, data protection, or matters qualifying for whistleblower protection under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998). IRVAP will make reasonable adjustments to this procedure as required under the Equality Act 2010 to ensure accessibility for all users, including but not limited to providing documents in alternative formats and allowing extended

timeframes where justified. It is not intended to be used for general disagreements with IRVAP policy or for routine commercial disputes that do not concern professional standards or service delivery.

- 2.2 Complaints must be raised within three months of the incident or within three months of the complainant reasonably becoming aware of the matter. IRVAP may accept later complaints where there is good reason for the delay, particularly in cases involving vulnerable individuals or where the Equality Act 2010 applies.
- 2.3 Where the complaint concerns safeguarding, criminality, or immediate risk to animal or public safety, IRVAP will take urgent action and may deviate from the standard timescales in order to protect safety and comply with legal obligations. IRVAP will fully cooperate with statutory safeguarding authorities, make mandatory reports where required by law, and take immediate protective action where necessary to prevent harm. This may include referral to the Local Authority, police, or other relevant authorities.
- 2.4 This Procedure does not cover internal employment disputes within IRVAP, commercial contract disputes between third parties, or policy decisions of the Council that do not directly engage professional standards or the conduct of named individuals. Such matters will be directed to the appropriate process or forum.

3. Types and Grounds for Complaints

- 3.1 Complaints may include, but are not limited to, allegations that an IRVAP Member or service provider has breached IRVAP's Policies, Codes of Conduct or professional standards; provided a negligent or substandard service; acted in a discriminatory, biased or unprofessional manner; failed to comply with legal obligations (including insurance or data protection); or behaved in a way that places animals, clients or the public at risk.
 - (a) **Breach of Policy, Procedure or Standards:** alleged failure to comply with IRVAP's, Codes of Conduct, professional standards or agreed protocols.
 - (b) **Conduct or Service Not Supported by Evidential Basis:** allegations that actions or decisions were taken without appropriate evidence, justification or professional basis.
 - (c) **Discrimination, Bias or Conflict of Interest:** concerns that the conduct complained of, or the handling of the complaint, was affected by unfair discrimination, bias or an undeclared conflict of interest.
- 3.2 A complaint should be submitted in writing to the IRVAP Chair (email or post) and should include: the complainant's name and contact details; the identity of the person(s) the complaint is about (if known); the date(s) and location(s) of the events complained of; a clear description of the complaint and the specific concerns; the outcome sought by the complainant; copies of any supporting documents or witness details; and confirmation

of any consent required to disclose personal data to relevant parties. On receipt, the IRVAP Chair will acknowledge the complaint in accordance with clause 4.1(a), confirm who will handle it, set out the next steps and give an estimated timetable.

3.3 IRVAP will not normally accept or investigate anonymous complaints. However, in exceptional circumstances where the complaint raises serious concerns about public safety, animal welfare, safeguarding, or potential criminal conduct, the IRVAP Chair may exercise discretion to accept and investigate an anonymous complaint. Any decision to proceed with an anonymous complaint must be documented with clear justification and approved by at least two Council Officers.

4. Complaints Procedure Steps

4.1 The Procedure follows these mandatory stages: (a) receipt and acknowledgement; (b) initial assessment and conflict check; (c) attempt at informal resolution where appropriate and not contrary to public safety or regulatory obligations; (d) formal investigation where required; (e) decision, outcome communication and any remedial action; and (f) right of review under clause 6.1(d). IRVAP will use reasonable endeavours to meet the timelines set out below, taking into account the complexity of the matter and available resources. Any extension will be communicated promptly with a clear explanation and revised timeline.

- (a) **Acknowledgement:** IRVAP Chair will acknowledge receipt within 10 working days, summarise the process, identify the person handling the complaint, and give an initial estimate for when the complainant can expect a further update or final outcome, in accordance with clause 3.2.
- (b) **Initial Assessment and Conflict Check:** Within 15 working days of acknowledgement the IRVAP Chair will carry out an initial assessment to determine whether the complaint can be resolved informally or requires a formal investigation, whether any immediate interim measures are appropriate, and whether there are conflicts of interest requiring recusal. The parties will be notified of the outcome of the assessment and the route to be followed.
- (c) **Informal Resolution:** Where appropriate, IRVAP will attempt to resolve the complaint informally and promptly (for example by clarification, facilitation, mediation or an agreed remedy). The IRVAP Chair will seek to conclude informal resolution within 20 working days of the assessment and will confirm in writing whether the matter is closed or whether the complainant wishes to proceed to a formal investigation.
- (d) **Formal Investigation:** If a formal investigation is required the IRVAP Chair will appoint an Investigating Officer (an appropriately experienced Council Officer or trained volunteer, who may be internal or an independent external expert/advisor) and prepare an investigation plan. The Investigating Officer will

gather and preserve evidence, interview relevant persons (providing the opportunity to be accompanied where appropriate), obtain written statements, and document all steps taken. The substantive investigation will normally be completed within 30 working days of the decision to investigate; if this timeframe cannot be met IRVAP will notify the complainant and respondent in writing, explain the reasons for the delay and provide a revised timetable (no later than 10 working days before the original deadline).

5. Investigation and Decision-Making Bodies

- 5.1 The person(s) who investigate and decide a complaint will be selected based on the complexity and seriousness of the matter to ensure independence and appropriate expertise. For straightforward complaints, an Investigating Officer will conduct the investigation and make findings. Where a complaint is complex, could lead to disciplinary action affecting membership status, or where impartiality would be better secured by a panel, a decision-making panel of at least three suitably experienced individuals (none of whom were involved in the original matter and who have no conflict of interest) may be convened. Where necessary for ensuring impartiality or where specialist expertise is required, IRVAP may appoint an independent external assessor to sit on the panel, or act as the Investigating Officer.
- 5.2 Where a panel is required, the provisions for convening the panel and decision timelines are set out in clause 6.1(c).
- 5.3 Decisions and Outcomes: The investigating officer or panel will reach findings on the balance of probabilities, record the factual findings, and recommend appropriate remedial actions or where appropriate, the matter may be referred to IRVAP's disciplinary procedure or membership process in accordance with IRVAP's constitution. Nothing in this Procedure prevents a party from seeking alternative legal remedies or from exercising statutory rights.

6. Investigation and Decision Process

- 6.1 The decision-making process will follow the principles of impartiality, proportionality and reasoned decision-making. Steps include: (a) confirmation of the complaint scope; (b) gathering and preservation of evidence; (c) obtaining witness statements and responses from the person complained about (the “**respondent**”); (d) analysis of the evidence against relevant standards; (e) where a panel is convened, voting on findings and recommendations (decisions to be made by simple majority); (f) drafting of findings and recommended actions; and (g) communication of the findings and next steps. Each step will be documented and the respondent and complainant given at least 15 working days from receipt of the allegations or draft findings (as applicable) to set out their views on material facts, unless a shorter period is justified by urgency or risk to safety.

- (a) **Initial Review:** IRVAP Chair will screen complaints to determine whether they are within scope, whether they are frivolous, vexatious or malicious, or whether they raise issues warranting referral to another organisation (for example the police, regulators or a safeguarding authority). If a complaint is to be dismissed as out of scope or manifestly without merit, the IRVAP Chair must document the specific reasons and obtain approval from a second officer before dismissal. The complainant will be informed of the reasons in writing and advised of their right to challenge this determination within 10 working days.
- (b) **Investigative Review:** The Investigating Officer will collect relevant documents, interview witnesses and the respondent, and provide the respondent with the allegations and an opportunity to respond in writing within 15 working days from conclusion of the initial review. All interviews must be recorded and transcribed, with contemporaneous notes taken as backup. Interviewees must be provided with a copy of their interview record for verification within 10 working days. All evidence will be retained on the complaint file with a clear chain of custody. Investigations will be conducted impartially and without unreasonable delay, with appropriate measures taken to ensure fairness to all parties.
- (c) **Recommendations and Report:** On conclusion of the investigation the Investigating Officer or panel will produce a written report for the IRVAP Chair (which the IRVAP Chair may present to the IRVAP Council for a vote where deemed appropriate or necessary) setting out findings of fact, conclusions on whether the evidence shows a breach of standards on the balance of probabilities, and recommended remedies or sanctions. Where a panel has been convened, decisions on findings and recommendations shall be made by simple majority vote, with the chair of the panel holding a casting vote in the event of a tie.
- (d) Either party may request an internal review within 20 working days of written notification of the decision. Such review may be requested on grounds of: (1) procedural unfairness or material procedural error; (2) new evidence that could not reasonably have been available during the initial investigation; (3) demonstrable error in the application of IRVAP standards or policies; or (4) the outcome or sanction imposed is disproportionate or unjust in relation to the conduct found. The review does not constitute a full re-hearing of the complaint. Review requests must specify the grounds being challenged. The internal review will be conducted by a person or panel who was not involved in the original decision and will be completed within 30 working days of receipt of the review request. No further internal appeal exists unless expressly provided elsewhere in IRVAP's constitution or policies. Any remedial action imposed will be proportionate and, where applicable, will include a period for compliance and follow-up checks. Unless the review panel or officer directs otherwise, or unless immediate action is required for safety reasons, remedial actions will take effect

from the later of: (i) the expiry of the 20 working day review request period without a review being requested; or (ii) the conclusion of any internal review that has been requested.

(e) **Finality and Legal Rights:** Subject to any internal review under clause 6.1(d) and without prejudice to any rights to bring matters before a court or regulator, the decision concluded under this Procedure will be final within IRVAP's internal processes.

7. Notification of Decision and Outcomes

7.1 The IRVAP Chair will ensure that written notification of the outcome is provided to the complainant and respondent within 10 working days of the initial recommendation being finalised. Where an internal review is subsequently requested under clause 6.1(d), a further written notification will be provided to both parties within 10 working days of the review decision. The notification will be clear, accessible, provided in the recipient's preferred format where reasonable, and will include the elements identified below unless legal or confidentiality obligations prevent disclosure of particular information. Where information must be withheld, the notification shall explain the general nature of the restriction preventing disclosure.

- (a) A clear statement of the decision;
- (b) A succinct summary of the reasons and the evidence relied on (to the extent it can be disclosed without breaching confidentiality or legal obligations);
- (c) Any remedial actions, recommendations or sanctions imposed and the timescales for compliance, monitoring or review; and
- (d) Information on the limited right of internal review (see clause 6.1(d)), and advice on other routes of redress (for example reporting to another regulator or seeking legal advice), together with an explanation of how personal data about the complaint is handled under data protection law.

7.2 **Confidentiality:** Decisions and the underlying records will be disclosed only to the complainant and respondent and to those IRVAP Officers, panel members or advisers who need to see them in order to make or implement decisions, except where IRVAP is required by law to disclose information or where there is an immediate risk to public safety or animal welfare. All IRVAP Officers, panel members, advisers and investigators receiving complaint information must sign IRVAP's Non-Disclosure Agreement prior to commencing any proceedings or receiving any complaint information and be briefed on their data protection obligations. Any breach of confidentiality will be treated as a serious disciplinary matter. IRVAP may publish anonymised summaries of complaints and outcomes for learning and transparency purposes, ensuring all personal data and identifying details are removed. Such publication will comply with data protection

requirements and maintain confidentiality of all parties involved. The IRVAP Chair is responsible for ensuring that communications are clear and proportionate.

8. Record Keeping

8.1 IRVAP will maintain accurate, contemporaneous and secure records of all complaints, investigations, outcomes and any subsequent action. Records will include (as applicable):

- (a) the date the complaint was received;
- (b) the name and contact details of the complainant and the respondent (where known);
- (c) a summary of the issues complained of and the outcome sought;
- (d) the date and summary of any meetings, interviews or hearings held;
- (e) copies of key correspondence between the parties and the IRVAP Chair or panel;
- (f) the final decision and the reasons for it (subject to confidentiality constraints); and
- (g) any remedial actions, monitoring, follow-up activity and lessons learned.

8.2 All records relating to complaints will be processed and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018, UK GDPR and IRVAP's data protection policies.

9. Review and Amendment of the Complaints Handling Procedure

9.1 This Complaints Handling Procedure shall be reviewed periodically and may be amended by IRVAP as necessary to ensure continuing compliance with applicable law, regulatory requirements and professional standards (including IRVAP's Policies, Codes of Practice and Codes of Conduct). The Council will approve any substantive amendments prior to implementation.

9.2 Any updates to this Procedure will be published on IRVAP's website and made available on request.